



Bloom into You

Regarding Saeki Sayaka

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NOVEL

3

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Bloom into You

Regarding Saku Sasaki

3

STORY | Hitoma Iruma
ART &
DESIGNS | Nakatani Nio



After opening up her heart to me, that was



After opening up her heart to me, that was the final thing she did to finish things off.

Edamoto-san, literally right before my eyes, only was half-visible in my vision.

In the other half of my vision, I absentmindedly thought back to my junior high days.



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“Bloom into You”

Regarding Saeki Sayaka

BLOOM INTO YOU: REGARDING SAEKI SAYAKA VOL. 3

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Regarding Saeki Sayaka

NOVEL

3

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Seven Seas Entertainment

Moored Ship

“I process things quickly,” she said.

The face that stared back at me wore a slightly different expression from the pleasant smile I’d grown accustomed to seeing. Something glossy, like droplets of water, inched down her obviously blushing cheeks.

“Process?” I asked, holding back the slight bewilderment that crept over me.

“That’s right. I guess you could say I’m practical or that I don’t lose sleep over things I can’t control.”

A shadow came over her face again. It was as though the sun had set, and something dark was reaching out from afar.

“I’m never angry or sad for long. I can’t do it, even if I try. It hurts when your feelings don’t mesh with someone else’s and things don’t go over well. It hurts, a lot. But it’s like my heart dries up fast. It’s the same for anger—I can’t be angry at a person for more than thirty minutes.”

I supposed thirty minutes really wasn’t very long. Personally, I could stay angry for a whole year, or even two.

“I feel like morning turns to night faster for me than other people,” she continued. “Plus, people keep telling me that I walk too fast.”

“I don’t know if that one’s connected...”

She might simply be an impatient person. Still, I did envy how quickly she could switch gears. I was the kind of person who lingered and drew things out, which created the best conditions for regrets.

There wasn’t even a table between us; we were very, *very* close. Close enough that, had she sunk down slightly, we would have practically been on top of each other. Close enough that I could swear I heard the creaking of her bones as she placed a hand on the floor.

“That’s why, even though my eyes were following someone else a little while ago, they’re only looking at you now, Sayaka-senpai.”

Sure enough, her chestnut eyes were fixed on me directly. I did my best not to react to what had practically been a confession of love. Since I was the older one—her upperclassman—I felt a certain degree of pride and stubbornness, as though I had to make sure I wasn't the one who gave in first.

"That's what you'd call being on the verge of love," I said. I'd felt it before, and knew what it was, though it felt a little arrogant to say so when I was the apparent object of such affections.

"Well, I guess that might be what it ends up being. But that's just, I dunno...so blunt."

This close, it was difficult to avoid her gaze. Every time we spoke, the passion in our voices rose, and I felt it getting harder to breathe.

"Well, I just can't help it. You're just so amazingly...amazing to me."

That vocabulary was enough to make me worry about her grades. Maybe this was proof I shouldn't be getting involved with an underclassman?

"If I had to say what I like best about you, uh, it'd be your face," she continued. "Your face is just the best." Suddenly bashful, she closed her eyes, as though trying to conceal how her nose was turning red.

"Thanks..." I had to admit her fidgeting was adorable. "I can understand that."

Appearances may not be everything, but they're important. I considered it more sincere to compliment a person's appearance when you didn't know them very well, rather than pretend to know their inner thoughts.

In return, I evaluated her with the same sincerity she'd given me. She was looking straight at me, head-on. She always had, since the moment we first met. I appreciated that for the privilege it was, but there was something I was wondering about.

"When you said that your emotions don't last long—does that include things you enjoy?"

And does that include when you love someone?

"It might." Was the hint of loneliness in her mellow voice because she had an inkling of what might be to come? The shadow over her face deepened. "And since it might not last long, I thought I should say it

now.”

In that moment, it was like she became my shadow itself. If we were stars, we would have drawn too close—close enough that both of us might be destroyed. There was a fervor layered over her face and voice that I had never seen in her before.

“Because, right now, I’ve fallen for you,” she said.

And so, it was partway through my second year in college that a girl confessed her love to me.

How long had it been since I last had such an encounter?

The Clear Sea

> > **I**

'VE BEEN JUMPING and hopping around lately. <<

> Seems good for your health. <

> > I hurt all over... But it's fun. I kind of feel like it's a luxury that I have an opportunity to become someone other than myself. <<

> Actors sure are something. I don't think I could ever do that—become someone else, I mean. Not unless something drastic happened. <

> > But you've been on stage, too, Sayaka. <<

> That was...just me. I felt like I was starring in the play as myself. <

> > If you could pull off the role like that, that's impressive in its own way. I'd like to do something like that again someday. <<

> Right. Someday. <

> > Yeah, someday. <<

I was a second year, and she was a first year. I don't say this as a point of pride, just to explain why, when our eyes met, she gave me a nod but still kept her distance. Tracking my gaze, the friend sitting across from me asked, "Sayaka, is she a friend of yours?"

"Yes. She's a first year, though."

"Aw, she could have just come over anyway... Well, okay, maybe not." My friend changed her mind mid-sentence, probably remembering

her own days as a first year. It was harder to guess everyone's ages without uniforms to mark their grades, and as a first year, everyone around you looked older. You felt out of place no matter where you went on campus.

"Next time we see her try to run off, let's catch her."

"Catch her?" I gave a strained smile. My friend's uninhibited manner reminded me of someone from my high school days.

"Erm, what's her name?"

"Edamoto-san."

Edamoto Haru. I had yet to call my college underclassman by her first name.

Spring was scorching, the air shifting to a faint ochre color. Though our table at the open café sat under the shade of a parasol, it was still hot. The shadows of the pedestrians flowing past us were lengthening. I watched those shadows overlap for a while as the silence stretched and my friend's eyelids grew heavy.

"I'm sleepy," she grumbled lazily. She slumped down as if she had no intention of attempting to revive herself. "I really just shouldn't eat lunch. It makes it impossible to function after."

"But going hungry would make it hard to function, too," I said.

My friend pinched the end of her straw, unneeded now that she'd finished her drink. "I guess. It's a lose-lose situation."

"That's too bad."

"I give up. I'm going home." My friend pushed off the table to stand up, suddenly energetic, as though she'd forgotten all about being tired.

"What about class?" I asked.

"It'll be fine. Skipping once isn't so bad."

"This is your third time."

"If you don't add them all up, it's just three separate ones."

I rolled my eyes at this illogical attempt to justify herself. Well, it didn't affect me, so I supposed I didn't care. My past self probably wouldn't have forgiven others for being so flippant. I wasn't sure whether I'd become more accepting or just too lenient.

We left the protection of the parasol, the sun beating down upon our heads. The summer of my twentieth year awaited me under that intense sunlight. At times, my high school days felt like a far-off dream, while other times it was like they had just happened yesterday.

I parted from my friend, who really was heading out through the main gate, and then blended into the flow of people going to the lecture building. When I looked at the sea of students and professors around me, each focused on their own goals and own thoughts, I felt strangely restless. I felt the world milling around me in the way one might be aware of the blood circulating throughout your body.

Someone once said that college is the best place to find something. That something could be your future career, future relationships, or even the truth of your own laziness...for better or worse. My friend, who fled from lectures, might have found something other than scholarship in college.

I hadn't found anything concrete in my first year. What about my second? What might I find?

I looked to the skies, as though seeking something hidden beyond the dazzling light.

The next day, I happened to see Edamoto-san again in transit. My eyes met hers beyond the glass of a co-op store I passed, where she was standing before the register. In that moment, it was like the corners of her mouth and her tied-up hair both sprung up in greeting.

Still holding her wallet in her hand, she forcefully held up her palm toward me. Then, after looking around indecisively, she lowered the hand and the shopping basket it contained with a grunt. It seemed heavy. She was clearly in the middle of paying; why not just finish that up instead of getting so excited? The employee serving her seemed bewildered, too.

After Edamoto-san finished paying, chattering all the while, she rushed out of the store with such force that I feared she might drop her wallet, her purchases, and her bag all at once. *There's no need to rush*, I thought automatically. As I silently waited for her to reach me, the sun passed behind the clouds. A strong wind ruffled the banner in front of the co-op, snapping it loud enough to reach my ears.

"It's hard to signal someone that you want them to wait a sec,

isn't it?" she said awkwardly, with a bashful smile.

I couldn't help smiling back at her. "It is. I didn't understand in the least."

"Aw, I knew it. Hmm, but you waited anyway, so I guess it's fine."

Edamoto-san put her wallet away and came up next to me, and we resumed walking in the same direction. I watched the way she walked: not with a stoop but with a slight pitch forward.

Edamoto Haru. A first-year college student, one year younger than me. She was petite, and her short ponytail would bounce charmingly like the tip of a brush when she walked. The corners of her eyes were slightly raised, like a cat's—but when those eyes met mine, she would give me a cheerful smile, so she was much clearer and more forthright about intentions than any cat I'd even known.

When she faced forward, her ponytail and exposed ears gave her the sharp profile of a young boy, but when she turned toward you, her femininity was immediately apparent. It was both strange and novel to me to be around someone with such distinctly visual shifts in mood. She was always a touch too loud, and walked quickly, as though she hated to stop. She came to my side like this whenever she saw me, cheerfully, without a hint of hesitation.

"So, Edamoto-san..."

"You can call me Haru."

"Edamoto-san."

"You're so stubborn." Despite my evasion, her smile was untarnished. "So, what were you gonna say?"

"It seems like you're following me. Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

"I don't have afternoon lectures today, so I'm headed where I want to go. Right over here!"

She smiled and pointed ahead. I suspected that if I had walked in the opposite direction, she would have found a destination that way instead.

"There's a gate if we walk in this direction, too."

"Yes, there is."

"Though this is sort of a roundabout way to get back to my room."

“To what room?”

“To my apartment. It just seemed confusing to call it my ‘house’.”

My eyes went round with surprise at that. “You live alone?”

“Yup. Since my parents’ house is pretty far away.”

Edamoto-san lifted up her co-op shopping bag. I could see a carton of milk through the thin plastic. We had headed home from campus together in the past, but when I thought about it, I realized that Edamoto-san had always parted ways with me before we reached the station.

“Sayaka-senpai, you commute from your parents’ place, right?”

“Yes.” I already had experience commuting to school by train in my junior high years, so I was used to it. Now that I thought about it, I’d never lived away from home. I was too used to a world where my family, cats, and a room with a familiar ceiling to look up at were ever-present. Just as a creature adapted to aquatic life couldn’t come up onto land, leaving that familiar world behind was beyond me.

For some reason, I found myself thinking of a close friend of mine, who had left home quite naturally and started walking her own path.

We walked between the trees and buildings, passing several lecture halls. I’d been here an entire year, but every face we passed was unfamiliar to me. Unlike high school, the relationships that formed in college spanned frameworks and categories. Just like how I was currently walking with an underclassman, a year younger than me, whom I’d met by chance.

It was news to me that Edamoto-san was living away from home. There was still so much I didn’t know about her. I hadn’t even asked her why she’d been crying when I first met her, nor had I seen her cry again since then. I felt some belated curiosity stir within me but got the sense this wasn’t a good time to bring it up.

“Is your apartment close by?” I asked.

“Of course. That’s why I selected it.”

True enough.

“Why don’t you come visit sometime, Sayaka-senpai? We can have tea and, umm...” Edamoto-san glanced at her shopping bag. “...I can offer you some bean sprouts.”

“That’s a pairing I’ve never tried before.” I attempted to picture myself eating bean sprouts between sips of tea, but my imagination wasn’t up to the task. “Someday.”

“Someday, huh,” Edamoto-san snorted out a soundless laugh. “I kind of feel like an adult just made me an empty promise.”

With that, she looked up at me as if she was rather amused.

Since my parents were the type of people who would never give promises they couldn’t make good on, I didn’t know how that felt.

We were just talking about hanging out for a bit at a friend’s house. I was probably taking it too seriously.

I knew that, but I still felt intimidated by the thought. Was it because of my inexperience or just my very nature? Going to visit another girl’s house held no small significance for the person named Saeki Sayaka.

It wasn’t as though I felt those sorts of emotions toward Edamoto-san, of course.

Still, if our relationship deepened... But how deep exactly does a friendship go? And should I really describe it as “deepening,” rather than “building up” a relationship?

After all, going deeper meant that you were sinking.

Once we got to the lecture hall that I had been heading toward, I parted ways with Edamoto-san.

Edamoto-san shifted her weight restlessly and shot me a sly smile.

“Although if you were a bad girl, I would just invite you to hang out right now, Sayaka-senpai.”

“A ‘bad girl’?” Bemused by the expression, I tried taking the opposite approach. “Why, do I look like a good girl?”

“Very much so.”

“You don’t have much of an eye for things, then.”

I meant that sincerely, but Edamoto-san seemed to take it as a joke and kept on smiling.

Right before going through the door, I turned around to find Edamoto-san waving at me wildly from a distance. I wondered what she would have done if I hadn’t turned around—it would have become a

very sad affair.

“She’s an odd one...” I muttered, but waved my hand demurely at her.

Edamoto-san seemed satisfied to have gotten a response. She turned away and jogged towards the gate, her shopping bag theatrically bouncing along up and down with her. As I wondered whether she should be more concerned about that, I watched her until I could no longer see the movement of her ponytail.

Once I got into the second-floor lecture room, I took a seat near the center and exhaled.

Though it wasn’t to the point it was actually tiring, spending time with Edamoto-san felt like I was being drawn into leaping and jumping along with her. Her movements were always on the exaggerated side, and she seemed to be not only bursting with energy but full of too many emotions entirely. I had never dealt with a personality like hers before.

“Although, if I had to compare her to someone...”

An old face I’d nearly forgotten resurfaced in my mind as if I’d tugged on a thread.

Relationships were a mess of strange stimuli.

In the interval before the lecture started, I thought for a while about Edamoto-san and the past.

At the very least, it seemed that I wouldn’t forget her name or what she looked like.

>>*Sayaka-senpai.*<<

>>*Are you at school right now?*<<

>*I am.*<

>>*Have you had lunch?*<<

>>*Do you have any plans?*<<

>*None in particular.*<

>>*Come eat with me!*<<

>> Will you? <<

> Sure. <

> Are you also at school, Edamoto-san? <

>> You can call me Haru. <<

> Where should we meet? <

> Edamoto-san? <

>> Whoa, you're like a steel wall. <<

>> Right, where to meet... <<

>> At mi casa. <<

> Umm. <

> You mean your place? <

>> Oh, not at the one that's far away, of course. <<

>> At my apartment. <<

> Well, obviously... <

>> But I thought you said calling it your "house" would be confusing? <<

>> Well, yeah, but... <<

>> I thought that calling it mi casa instead of my apartment <<

>> would be softer and wouldn't put you on your guard. <<

"Aha ha ha."

A dry chuckle spilled from my lips as I held my phone. She was honest but also a bit cheeky.

Still, the word *guard* caught my attention a bit.

What did I need to be on my guard about if I was going for a quick visit to a underclassman's house?

What is with this girl...? I unintentionally narrowed my eyes.

> *What do you mean about being on guard?* <
> *Are you planning something devious?* <

>> *I don't have the brains to plan anything.* <<

>> *It's too bad I'm lacking in that regard.* <<

>> *I wonder what kinds of devious things you'd be capable of, Sayaka-senpai.* <<

> *Who knows...?* <
> *So, at your apartment, then?* <

>> *Yep, yep.* <<

> *I see...?* <

>> *My place is nice and cool.* <<

>> *Plus drinks are on the house.* <<

>> *And the food's probably tasty.* <<

> *What are we eating?* <

>> *I haven't thought of what yet, but...* <<

>> *I'm planning on making something.* <<

>> *That's why it's probably tasty.* <<

> *You're making it yourself?* <

>> *I'm actually pretty experienced, yeah.* <<

>> *And you can call me Haru.* <<

>> *I like it—my own name, that is.* <<

>I'll think about it.<

>>Okay, I can't wait.<<

>>Oh, which thing were you thinking over?<<

>>Lunch or my name?<<

>Both.<

>>Well, I hope you make a decision soon about lunch...<<

>>I'll make something you want to eat.<<

>Right.<

>>...Right?<<

>Then I suppose I'll take you up on that.<

>>Right!<<

>>Right, yeah, awesome!<<

>Try not to get too excited, hmm?<

>>I'm at my apartment right now, so I'll head over to you!<<

>I'll be waiting at the gate.<

>Please come get me.<

>>I'll run over!<<

>>I'm running now!<<

>I'd rather not run, so please take your time.<

I put away my phone and stood up from my seat. While I was focused on our exchange, most of the other students had left the lecture room.

After I looked around the room feeling like an overlooked weed, I started walking at what I thought was a quick pace.

“She’s rather forward...”

This girl was pressing in on me. A sensation like a strong wave sweeping me away shook me to the core.

I wondered if she stepped into other people’s lives just as freely. Even if that was just her nature, I didn’t find it very admirable. Most people wouldn’t want someone to encroach on their space with so little restraint, in my opinion.

She must be prioritizing her own feelings over anyone else’s.

That might have been the reason she was crying that day.

Thinking back, the tears streaming down her cheeks were in huge droplets.

I’m sure they must have been drawing up tons of emotion as they fell.

And by showing up on the spot where those tears fell, I had unintentionally shook up Edamoto-san’s emotions quite a bit, it seemed.

“Edamoto-san’s apartment... I wonder if this was a good idea.”

She had invited me the week before and again today. In the end, I decided to go. There hadn’t been anything to deepen our bond in particular—I hadn’t even seen Edamoto-san’s face this week. Edamoto-san amounted to nothing more than a friend whom I’d just met at college, but somehow she was casually pushing her way into my life.

Although I had agreed, I still felt a bit reluctant. For one thing, I didn’t have much experience going to friends’ houses, and for another... I tried to continue with that thread, but even when I waited for the next part to come, I couldn’t seem to produce it on my own.

What exactly was I expecting from Edamoto-san?

When I left the lecture building, the heat weighed down on me. Summer had spread its wings and set our world ablaze with just a flutter or two. There was no gentleness in the heat wave that brushed my cheek.

The cicadas had yet to follow on the back of summer. Soon the college and all its trees, abundant in verdure, would be a cacophony of their cries no matter where one went. And the human commotion on campus was not to be outdone. As lunch break began, the students appeared all at once, as though flitting out from a hive. One person, two, three. Even if I followed them with my finger and eyes, I wouldn't be able to keep up with them all.

These were all people whom I'm sure had lives not so different from my own college student experience.

As for the few individuals I met from among all these people...

Perhaps I should be more conscious of that and cherish those connections.

Breaking away from the crowd as it surged toward lunch, I went to the main gate, where I found Edamoto-san already standing next to the entrance. She noticed me and waved excitedly. That was childlike enough as it was, but when she used her entire body to give me an unrestrained reception, the passing students occasionally shot her strange glances. Eventually, she realized she was in the way and moved farther to the side, but she didn't stop waving her hand. Just seeing how close it was to smacking into the wall gave me a shudder.

I hurried over to Edamoto-san. When I got closer, it appeared that she really had run over, considering how sweaty her palms were. Her bangs, too, had become disheveled and were sticking to her forehead.

"I'm sorry...for making you wait."

"You don't need to apologize like that. I ran over because I like to run."

"You like to run, do you...?"

That was an unfamiliar feeling to me.

Come to think of it, I hadn't had to run at all lately. It was as though I hadn't had anything to hurry me.

Was that pleasant, or just boring...? It was probably up to each individual's interpretation.

I suddenly recalled the relay practices for the athletic festival in high school. In retrospect, I couldn't help laughing a little at how poorly I had worked with a certain someone.

“Okay, follow me.”

Edamoto-san merrily started moving. I was dragged along behind her, even though she hadn’t actually grabbed my hand.

On the way, my eyes met with the sea otter printed on Edamoto-san’s shirt... An otter?

The otter was looking straight out as it carefully cradled the shell in its paws. Maybe she liked otters.

“First, we cross here.”

We traversed across the road in front of the college. When Edamoto-san tried to cross the moment the signal turned green, I warned her, “It’s dangerous if you don’t look both ways first.”

It sounded like something an elementary school teacher would say.

“Oh, uh, sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize to me.”

It was plain to see that Edamoto-san was too giddy to pay attention to her surroundings. As for the reason for that, well, I supposed that was me.

I was a little troubled—her restlessness seemed like it could rub off on me.

Once we crossed the road and entered the shadow of a nearby building, I decided to speak to her. “So, Edamoto-san, you cook for yourself?”

“Yeah, I cooked even before I left home. It was just kind of fun.” Edamoto-san smiled, flashing her white teeth. “Do you not like domestic girls?”

“We’ll see. I have high expectations.”

As though in response, her gait widened. She didn’t seem to mind working up a sweat.

Edamoto-san’s apartment really was close to campus; we arrived in just under two minutes. Then again, that short time was also the result of me matching pace with Edamoto-san’s long, quick strides. The apartment building was lightly colored, from its khaki walls to its bluish-white roof, and its cramped bike parking area was piled high with bicycles. I wondered if Edamoto-san’s bike was among them.

I followed behind her as she went up the stairs on the side. Her place turned out to be the first apartment immediately after going up to the second floor. Edamoto-san stopped in front of the door and pulled a key out of her pocket. She put the key in, twisted it, and then likewise cocked her head to the side. After turning the key two or three times, she said, “Ohh, okay, I get it,” then opened the door.

“I forgot to lock it.”

“You didn’t need to leave in such a rush...”

“It’s fine, no problem. I love rushing.”

With that silly excuse, Edamoto-san beckoned me into the room. *Being so overly welcoming is actually going to put me even more on my guard*, I thought, half-joking. She was just having a friend over—a friend, nothing more.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

“Come on in. This is my first time inviting a friend over from college.”

This was my first time going over to a college friend’s house, too.

The moment I came in, the presence of Edamoto-san grew stronger. Most likely, it was due to the smell of her clothes and makeup, which I normally sensed only faintly. Obvious though this might be, the room was thick with Edamoto-san’s scent. It seemed to stand out against the scents of summer and was a bit refreshing as it slipped by my nose.

When I went through the entryway, I saw a toilet and a modular bathtub beyond the door to the right. In that dim interior, I saw my shadowy reflection in the bathroom mirror. Suddenly, I felt self-conscious about my overgrown hair that I had left uncut.

We passed by the bathroom and into a south-facing room with a bay window and good sun exposure. In other words, it was terribly hot.

“Your room is pretty warm.”

“I have the air conditioner on full blast, so if you’ll just wait a few more moments...”

Edamoto-san bowed jokingly and chuckled a little. Just as she said, the air conditioner set up next to her wall was running loudly, not unlike Edamoto-san herself when she rushed over to meet me.

Her room was tidy. To be more accurate, she didn't have much to keep clean: just a small white table, a bed by the wall, and a lamp directly on the floor. Her clothes were folded up and set in a corner—she didn't have a single shelf of any sort. Her college textbooks and bag were stuffed into what seemed to be a laundry basket.

"I don't have any floor cushions, so you can sit on the bed. You can even lie down if you want."

"I'm all right, thank you."

I chose the carpet and sat down. After I set my bag down next to me, I breathed out slowly.

It was a curious feeling to leave the college and look up at the ceiling of another person's apartment, even if it was lunch break. Normally, I just went to the cafeteria instead of going off campus to eat.

It felt almost as though I'd skipped out on school partway through the day... Maybe I hadn't completely left behind the feeling of being a high school student. As I glanced around, feeling a bit anxious, I heard Edamoto-san laugh.

"There isn't much to see here, is there?"

"I suppose. I can't compare it to other apartments, but it does seem very neat and minimalistic."

"Well, I figure there's no point buying more things if I'm just gonna lose interest in them and leave them lying around."

"Hmm..."

I thought of the novels I never reread on the bookshelf in my own room.

Edamoto-san took a green towel from the folded laundry pile at the far end of the room and wiped her forehead. As I gazed at her profile and mannerisms, I felt vaguely aware that we were alone together in her room. Since it wasn't a house, there were no family members around, which was an unusual situation to me.

I wondered if the light blue wallpaper was an attempt at a consolatory reprieve from the inevitable heat. There was a thin curtain, but since it was mercilessly showered in the sunlight, it likely lost effectiveness quickly.

"The supermarket is close by, and there's a home improvement

store, too, so I think it's a pretty good location. The modular bathtub is a little small, though."

After wiping her face and neck with the towel, Edamoto-san turned toward me.

"So, Sayaka-senpai, what would you like to eat?"

"Right..."

I went into thought for a bit. My body wanted something cold, but I'd just had a variety of somen noodles at home yesterday. *In that case...* I tried to line up the prospective choices in my thoughts, but I couldn't picture anything good.

"Nothing really comes to mind. I don't have any particularly strong preferences."

"That's the most difficult answer you could give..."

Edamoto-san smiled awkwardly as she bent down, presumably to open the refrigerator door. Because there was a wall between us, I couldn't see everything she was doing. But since her face was being showered with light, I thought that must be the case.

"Hm. Do you have any allergies or foods you can't stand?"

"Neither, really."

"Wow, you really don't have any preferences, then. Oh dear..."

Edamoto-san's ponytail wiggled fretfully. I didn't know what ingredients she had in the first place, so it was difficult to request something. When I shifted to take a look, I saw that the refrigerator next to her sink was very compact.

Edamoto-san pulled out a bottle of tea and poured it in glasses she'd put out in advance.

"Well, how about some tea for now?"

"Thank you."

"There's no ice since I don't have an ice maker, though."

"This is plenty. You don't have to fuss over me."

The glass I accepted was so cold that it felt like I was touching the liquid inside it directly. With delicate ridges, the glass encapsulated many colors at its bottom, drawing in the light and glittering. It was a rainbow glass.

It was so pretty that instead of drinking out of it, I ended up examining it from other angles.

“Well, I’m going to fuss anyway. Lots and lots.”

Edamoto-san rejected my politesse, wagging her finger and shaking her head from side to side.

“I mean, if you don’t like my place, Sayaka-senpai, then you won’t come again.”

“Hm.”

It wasn’t as though I was guaranteed to come back even if I *did* like it, but her earnestness did make a good impression on me.

It also felt nice to be clearly aware that she was being kind specifically for my sake.

“So anyway, that’s pretty, right?”

She pointed at the glass. When I replied, “Very,” Edamoto-san smiled as though she were relieved.

“I won’t give it to you, but make sure you take a good look at it.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

“And drink what’s inside it, too.”

“All right, all right.”

Edamoto-san returned to the front of the refrigerator. She pulled things out one at a time, scrutinizing each one and putting them back over and over.

“Then can I just make whatever?”

“I’ll leave it up to you.”

After putting the ball fully in her court, I finally drank some tea. I quenched my thirst and then closed my eyes. It became difficult to tell apart what was left and right. *What a quiet room*, I thought.

Unlike the college, there weren’t an abundance of trees close by, such that the cries of the cicadas might never reach here. The air conditioner had also calmed down from its blustery start-up. I peered into the corners of the room.

“So you don’t have a TV or a bookshelf.”

“I’m not really the reading type at all. And as long as I have my

smartphone, I don't really need a TV, either."

Beneath the sound of Edamoto-san's voice, I heard running water.

"Oh, sorry. Are you bored waiting for me?"

"No. I'm not bad at being patient."

Although I wasn't good at being patient, either. Perhaps I had never gone about waiting for things the right way before.

"I thought I might pass the time by talking with you, Edamoto-san."

"Oh, sounds great."

"But will you be all right talking while you work?"

"I'm fine, no problem. I normally talk to myself tons while I'm cooking."

"...You should probably be careful about that."

I could imagine Edamoto-san having a lively monologue alone in her room easily enough. At the same time, I pictured a chicken energetically moving around inside a pen.

"You seem like you read a ton of books, huh, Sayaka-senpai?"

I was fairly sure someone else had said that to me before. Perhaps that meant I gave off an intellectual impression.

"Well... I suppose you could say that."

"Do you go to the school library a lot?"

"I go to the library...on occasion. But I mostly just read the newspapers."

Edamoto-san didn't reply; I wasn't sure whether she could hear my voice over the clamorous sounds of cooking. Even though I had said I would talk to her, I didn't want to be a distraction, so I tried to make sure I wasn't initiating the conversation. Just as she had said, as she started cooking, she talked to herself more.

Occasionally, she would even whistle. Many of her choices were children's songs; though it wasn't yet sunset, she was trying to go home with the crows in her song. Maybe it had to do with her being able to hear that melody being broadcast in the distance when evening did come.

"Oh, riiight," she groaned abruptly. This time, she didn't seem to

be talking just to herself.

“What is it?”

“I don’t have many plates or bowls. Ha ha...”

Edamoto-san leaned back to show me her face, grinning sheepishly.

“Oh, right, since you live alone and all.”

It was only natural that she wouldn’t have more than the minimal number of dishes and chopsticks she needed.

“You can use mine, but then I wouldn’t be able to eat... Maybe I could borrow some from next door...? No, this isn’t quite right.”

Edamoto-san grumbled to herself uncertainly. While she did so, I came up with a simple solution.

I only faltered for a few seconds about whether to do it or not.

Before my feet could entangle themselves into the floor like roots, I drank all my tea and then stood up.

“I wonder if the home improvement store carries tableware?”

“Huh? Oh, good question...I think they have lunch boxes and stuff, at least.”

“Lunch boxes... Well, that ought to do just fine.”

I picked up my bag and headed to the entryway. Right as I was about to pass her, Edamoto-san scurried over to cut me off.

“Senpai?”

“I’ll go buy tableware while you’re cooking. I hope the store’s easy to find.”

Even though I’d been commuting to this college for over a year already, I hadn’t walked around the area outside campus much before. I always went shopping in my familiar home neighborhood, and on the rare occasion I went out with college friends, the only place I’d go would be a family restaurant.

“Ahh...I feel kinda bad. Let me pay for it, at least.”

“It’s fine, especially since you’re treating me to food and all. Make sure you lock the door.”

With that light warning, I put on my shoes. As I did so, I looked at

Edamoto-san's shoes next to mine. At a glance, they looked like children's shoes, so obviously her feet must be quite small.

For some reason, I was strangely perturbed to think of a girl with such small feet living alone.

After I finished putting on my shoes, I felt eyes on me and turned around to find Edamoto-san standing right behind me. She was crossing her arms behind her back.

"Uh, it might be weird to say this, but...like..."

She hemmed and hawed for a moment and then broke into a smile like a blooming flower of happiness.

"Come back soon."

"...Yes, I'll be right back."

I hesitated before exchanging the greeting with her, feeling strange and bewildered.

Since this wasn't my house, and she was just a friend... "strange" was the only way to describe how it felt.

It was rare for me to feel confusion that wasn't unpleasant, so I ended up answering how she wanted.

When I went out the door, my heart shaken a bit, the heat that I had nearly forgotten was waiting for me outside.

I headed to the stairs, sighing automatically due to the blinding sun. Perhaps it was pointless to go out of my way to buy tableware that I might not use again in the future. Maybe I was wasting my time, and maybe I was taking a detour. Regardless, I still walked on beneath the summer sky.

It was the beginning of the summer of my second year of college, and I still didn't know what I was supposed to achieve.

Since I didn't know the right answer, I could proceed in any direction I chose.

"Welcome back, Senpai."

"...Thank you."

There really was something embarrassing about having that exchange at a friend's apartment. That was no different than our

exchange on my way out, though.

I had even gone to buy tableware, almost as though we were living together... Anyway, it was weird. Edamoto-san didn't seem particularly aware of that as she welcomed me back, peering at the shopping bag that dangled from my hand.

"You didn't get lost?"

"I didn't have to take any turns, so yes, I managed."

The walk to the home improvement shop was a straight line past the front of the college. According to her additional directions, turning left partway and walking further would get you to the supermarket. In a town that was chock-full of buildings to the point where it felt cramped, it might only be natural that the roads were minimally planned.

I was relieved to find that the air conditioning in the apartment was working well. On top of that, there was something fragrant mixing in the smells of the apartment. Drawn in by the scent that was stronger than Edamoto-san's, I peered into the kitchen and found the source of the smell in a pot containing simmering chicken and eggs.

"Is that *oyakodon*?"

"Yeah, since I had leftover chicken, plus some rice I made yesterday."

I reached into the bag and pulled out the bowls I'd purchased. I had bought two, thinking of the possibility that there might be a soup, but perhaps that was excessive. In a frying pan next to the pot, there was something that seemed like a stir-fry of green onion and shiitake mushrooms.

"And that's just something I ate a lot at home. Also..."

Edamoto-san turned to the table. Irresistibly following her gaze, I found a mountain of torn lettuce pieces—just raw, unseasoned lettuce—piled high in a bowl.

"I thought just having two things at the table would look kind of sparse, so I tried adding more stuff." She glanced at the empty rainbow glass that was still off to the side where I'd left it. "Maybe I should have gotten more stuff ready before I invited you."

"This is plenty. I doubt I'll be able to finish it all anyway."

I was grateful she was being so considerate and hospitable, but I

wasn't a particularly big eater.

She told me to sit while she got things ready, so I obediently took a seat in front of the table. I picked up the chopsticks I had bought and looked at their perfectly matched tips. I think it was my first time buying chopsticks for myself.

After all, normally you only needed one pair at home.

Wondering how I had ended up with two pairs, I opened and closed the chopsticks as I gazed at them for a while.

Edamoto-san put down the oyakodon pot and the frying pan each on their own trivets. Upon closer inspection, one of them was a place mat rather than an actual trivet. I wondered whether that was really all right, but Edamoto-san didn't even pause as she served the oyakodon components into my bowl, loading it up until it seemed about to overflow.

“...Thank you.”

“If that's not enough, you can put as much as you want on top.”

If I added any more than this, I felt like it'd end up spilling, and my fingers would be covered in egg.

“All right, we've got everything we need.”

Looking at the new bowls and the pot, she broke into a satisfied smile.

Edamoto-san had cooked, and I had bought the tableware we were lacking.

It was almost as though Edamoto-san and I were living together. As I thought that, I secretly felt bashful.

“Well, thank you for the meal.”

“Go ahead, dig in.”

She motioned urgently for me to eat, not even picking up her own chopsticks. It seemed that she wouldn't even touch her food until I ate. I picked up the food she had served me with my chopsticks and brought it to my mouth. Then I chewed and slowly swallowed.

Wow. Taking in the lingering taste on the insides of my cheeks and on the tip of my tongue, I instinctively glanced back at my bowl.

“How is it?”

As soon as I finished eating a bite, Edamoto-san asked me for my thoughts. She really was a hasty person.

“Yes, it’s good.”

“Oh!”

“Very.”

“Very?!”

Her voice cracked. After she coughed and cleared her throat, Edamoto-san withdrew, seeming relieved, and sat back down.

“Well, that’s wonderful... I’m really relieved.”

“You’re being pretty dramatic.”

“I mean, I would’ve felt awful if you didn’t like it after going out of your way to buy bowls.”

I suppose that’s fair, I thought, then looked at the bowl I held in my hand and smiled slightly.

At the very least, I thought Edamoto-san’s cooking was worth having gone out and bought them.

I stretched out my chopsticks toward the stir-fry. In response, Edamoto-san’s eyes also followed my movements.

It was a little difficult to eat under such scrutiny.

“Is it good?” she asked again. Being ogled as I chewed on the shiitake made it hard to swallow.

“It’s good.”

“Oh, looks like your opinion fell by a rank.”

She seemed amused by this, not particularly disappointed. I swallowed.

“I just thought it might be pointless to repeat myself.”

“I think it’s a good thing to repeat positive words, though.”

“All right, then. It’s *very* good.”

“Wah ha ha ha!” Edamoto-san was genuinely thrilled. She had a fitting smile for such simple praise.

Next, I nibbled on the lettuce.

“Is it good?”

I figured she would ask as much.

“It’s nice and crisp.”

“Right? Isn’t it?”

Even though I was only chewing on lettuce she had ripped up, Edamoto-san seemed proud.

It was a bit entertaining.

After I gave her my review of everything on the table, Edamoto-san finally started eating. While she did so, she spoke less, her hands and mouth working silently. I was secretly impressed with her posture and behavior; her back was unexpectedly straight and proper. It was very different from her normal way of speaking and messy movements.

But the result was still typical Edamoto-san.

“That hit the spot.”

“.....”

“What is it, Senpai?”

“I was just thinking that you eat pretty fast.”

“Huh?”

Edamoto-san, who had finished eating before I knew it, looked at my bowl. “Oh yeah, look at that,” she remarked as she looked at my remaining food.

“This was how fast I normally ate at home, so...yeah.”

“Does everyone rush at your house?”

“Maybe so.”

Edamoto-san grinned sheepishly as she took her bowl to the sink. She came back right away and sat back down in the same spot. Her eyes flicked around between me, the pot, outside, and back to me. Then, she suddenly spaced out in a different direction, like a cat staring at a seemingly empty corner.

Her small ponytail that wagged along with her movements reminded me of a short tail.

“Is it good?” she leaned forward and asked again.

I wondered if my feelings hadn’t been conveyed sufficiently the first time.

It's a good thing to repeat positive words. I remembered what she had just said.

“It’s good, and feels a bit odd.”

“Odd?”

I picked up a shiitake as I responded. “Since I think this is the first time I’ve eaten a friend’s cooking.”

It was my first home-cooked meal from a friend. The first one-person apartment I had gone to. And, most of all, it was my first time encountering a underclassman like the one in front of my eyes.

“...What’s up?” Edamoto-san asked, as though becoming self-conscious under my gaze.

“It’s nothing, really...”

I was experiencing many firsts with Edamoto-san.

Most likely, it was because I’d never had a close bond with a personality like hers before.

Back then, I’m sure that if I hadn’t seen her crying by chance, we never would have spent time together. Even if we had have been briefly introduced by someone, I think I would have just wandered away without much interest.

It was specifically because of that occasion that I was eating oyakodon like this.

In fact, this underclassman had many traits that I had never found very charming before.

So if I had to say...

“I thought at first that you were a little bit like someone who used to bother me in the past.”

It was that lighthearted smile of hers that seemed to pull me along by the arm.

“Hmm...” Edamoto-san frowned a little, squinting in thought. Then she screwed up her lips in a pout, still squinting. “Wait, was that your indirect way of telling me you don’t like me? Isn’t that kind of a big deal?”

“No, it’s not like that.”

“Then if you wouldn’t mind explaining what it is like...”

"It means that...I'm curious what kind of relationship I might be able to build now with the kind of person who bothered me in the past."

That girl I met back then was endlessly one-sided. I wonder if she ever thought about my feelings even once. We were children then, so perhaps she wasn't capable of that level of thinking, and I'm sure her natural personality had something to do with it, too. Though her behavior and expectations had generally bothered me at the time, now I might be able to grasp her wishes and intentions a bit more. I think that's a sign that I've grown.

"Hmm...uhh...Sayaka-senpai, do I bother you?"

"Not at the moment, at least."

Besides, your cooking's quite good, I thought, taking another bite to thoughtfully analyze the flavor. As I chewed, I felt a desire for some palate-cleansing soup, but of course I didn't say that out loud. Edamoto-san slumped onto the table.

"Whaaat... So I'm like them, but I don't bother you... I don't get it."

"You're just a *bit* like her, that's all. You aren't the same person."

"How am I like her?"

"Well...you're energetic, I suppose."

"You don't like energetic people? Sayaka-senpai, how have you gotten by until now? Wouldn't that leave you so down in the dumps you'd grow mushrooms out of your head?"

She ended up concerned for me, imagining I had gloomy relationships. I suppose that might be a concern if a bunch of non-energetic people all gathered together.

"...Perhaps I phrased that poorly. I think what I mean is, you act without thinking first."

She was like a cat pouncing on anything that moved. Only after the fact would she finally think about what it meant. It was the precise opposite of being prudent, but it meant she was able to progress forward faster than people who were prone to becoming fixated and stagnating. When I was a child, I could never bring myself to take action until I found a good reason.

"So that's what you mean. I guess that kinda makes sense."

Edamoto-san straightened up, as though she'd hit on an idea. Then, she looked at me.

It was hard to eat while being stared at so intently. I lowered my chopsticks.

What's wrong? I asked with my eyes. Edamoto-san chuckled lightly.

"If I don't rush things, I'm afraid they'll just end right away."

"What will end?"

Edamoto-san stood up without responding to my question and then headed to the sink. I heard her starting to wash the dishes.

"If you waited a little longer, I would've helped."

"The sink is small, so it'd be hard for you to help anyway."

True, I nearly agreed out loud. If Edamoto-san and I tried to stand side by side in there, it would probably be too cramped.

As I picked up the sounds of the running water from the hardworking air conditioner, I felt the illusion of cold droplets trickling along my neck.

"Sayaka-senpai, what are your plans for today?"

"Once lunch break is over, I'm going to class, and then..."

"And then?"

"...I'll go home."

"Aww, too bad."

Edamoto-san's tone was light, conveying that she hadn't particularly been expecting anything.

I actually had one place I needed to stop by before going home, but I left that out, figuring she didn't need to know the details. There wasn't such a lack of boundaries between us that I felt obliged to reveal everything.

I wonder if a relationship undivided by any walls even exists in the first place.

People even hide things from their own family, to some extent.

If you shared everything with someone without reserve, you might

not even be separate individuals anymore.

“So, Sayaka-senpai...are you seeing anyone?”

“.....”

The way she asked that, and how I should answer—those two things tripped me up.

But again, it wasn’t as though there were no walls between us.

“That’s a secret.”

For a while after I dodged the question, I only heard the sound of running water.

“Tsk.”

“What are you tsking for?”

“I was just thinking how I’d like us to become close enough that you would tell me something like that, I guess.”

With that, she trailed off, and the sound of rushing water grew louder. Even when I turned to her, I couldn’t see her expression.

I wanted to ask her exactly what kind of relationship she was hoping to have with me.

But I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

I moved my chopsticks to eat faster so she wouldn’t have to do dishes in two rounds. When I ate more quickly, I could barely register the taste, which seemed like a waste.

I lightly traced the surface of the bowl that I had just bought with my thumb.

Saeki-san, Sayaka-chan, Sayaka, Saeki-senpai. The names by which people I’d grown closest with referred to me over the years were all over the place. Such simple differences in what they called to me spoke volumes about each person and my relationship with them.

Maybe Sayaka-senpai would be added to their number. Maybe it wouldn’t.

But if my incredibly uncertain premonition—perhaps I should call it a hunch—was right...

I felt sure that it would.

>>*I'm here.*<<

>>*I'll go ahead in.*<<

>*I just arrived, too.*<

>>*I can see your head.*<<

>>*Wah!*<<

“Looks like business is booming.”

“Yeah, I can even hear voices from the second floor.”

I closed my eyes, inhaling the quiet murmur of footsteps and chatter along with the pleasant fragrance.

It seemed that Miyako-san’s café was doing better than it had in the past. The previously unused second floor was open now, and she had the capacity to hire part-time staff. Girls who looked like they were in high school whirled about in uniform, taking and serving orders as if they could barely keep up.

“You come here a lot, don’t you, Senpai?”

“Yes, especially on my way home after buying a new book.”

When I said that, the bookseller bowed her head jokingly. “Thank you for being a loyal customer.”

“What about you, Koito-san?”

“Not on my own, usually... I wouldn’t really fit in here by myself, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

The girl who sat across from me was Koito Yuu. She was a past underclassman and a current friend. She was also a person I’d had some very complicated feelings and opinions about.

Koito-san had lost her pigtails and now wore her slightly longer hair down. Naturally, she had become more grown-up than before. No one ever said that about me, so I might have already looked older than my years during my high school days. I felt like our height difference, and thus the difference in the level of our eyes, had shrunk a bit since then. *Although the same amount of time has passed for both of us... I thought with a little smile.*

“How’s Touko?”

Though she wasn’t here with us now, I asked for the latest news about her anyway. Koito-san held up her coffee cup, looking deep in thought.

“Well, erm...she’s running around a lot, I guess?”

“What does *that* mean?”

“She seems busy with her theater group, and also...”

“She acts on the professional stage sometimes, doesn’t she? That’s amazing.”

“It seems like she’s still hesitating about whether to really try becoming an actress, though.”

As an amateur, I ended up thinking, *Why is she so worried if she’s already gone pro?*, but I suppose that experience didn’t guarantee she could make a living on acting alone. The world of theater must be a difficult one.

“Wait, but you talk to Nanami-senpai, too, don’t you?”

“I haven’t had many opportunities to see her in person, but we’ve been in touch pretty often, yes.”

“Then why bother asking me? Isn’t that a bit pointless?” Koito-san laughed.

“It’s not pointless,” I politely objected. “I wanted to know how Touko seems to you.”

For many reasons, talking in depth about yourself to someone else was difficult. After all, if you don’t have a mirror, you won’t be able to see what kind of face you’re making.

I suddenly met eyes with Miyako-san, who was behind the counter. She gave me a slight wave with her usual soft smile. When I nodded back lightly, Koito-san noticed her, too, and gave the same greeting.

As we had just discussed, it seemed I was the only one of us high school graduates who dropped by here often. There were a lot more people who left their hometown to go to college than I expected. That included Midori and Manaka, and Touko, too.

The option of moving away from my parent’s house hadn’t even occurred to me.

For one thing, I didn't have a clear objective. More importantly, I probably didn't want what little time I had remaining with my elderly cats and grandparents to dwindle away.

Sometimes I ran into Hakozaki-sensei here. She was still working at the high school as always, and would give me the latest updates whenever we saw each other. Apparently the student council play had become established as part of the culture festival. Thinking about the fact that we'd left behind a definite legacy was a little embarrassing, somehow. She had invited me to come see it this year.

The conversation had shifted to getting the former student council members to attend as well, and now we were determining what came next.

"Will Touko be able to come, too? I know she's busy."

"It's still far ahead, so we can't be certain...but I think it'll work out."

"I see..."

If she did come, it would be my first time seeing Touko in person in a long while.

The distance between us had become a perfect excuse not to see each other.

Touko was living alone near her college, while Koito-san and I commuted from our family homes. Apparently, Koito-san had been staying over at Touko's place "occasionally," which I took to mean "very frequently." Observing her now, I made a confident guess.

"You stayed over yesterday, too, didn't you?"

Koito-san's shoulders jolted, unable to hide her surprise. "Huh? How did you know...?"

"That's simple..." I started to explain, then paused and let out a breath. "It's a secret."

"Whaaat..."

"If I tell you, then I can't tease you anymore."

"Hmph..."

Koito-san pouted, as if to accuse me of bullying. It never ceased to amuse me how easily she reverted to acting like my underclassman friend again with a little prodding, even though she looked different on

the outside. But in comparison, Edamoto-san was slightly more childish despite being around the same age, I thought.

Perhaps her relationship with Touko had induced Koito-san to mature somewhat.

Though I supposed I didn't know for sure whether Edamoto-san was seeing anyone or not.

"Saeki-senpai, what about you?"

"What about me?"

Koito-san grinned as if to say, *See? It's a hard question to answer.*

"Have you done anything fun?"

This light question gave me a bit more direction to work with. However, it felt unusual to be asked if I'd done anything fun. We had talked about Touko's future, so was I really getting off with such a casual question?

"Well..."

As I looked into the deep tawny brown of the liquid, a certain smile seemed to float to the surface.

There was also a sea otter's face next to it, but it was probably best to ignore that part.

"I made a friend. A first year."

That was about the extent of any recent changes in my life. I wasn't sure if that qualified as "fun."

"Oh yeah?" Koito-san's eyes went round. "What are they like? Is it a girl?"

"Yes, she's a girl...an energetic one. She's a fast walker and a good cook, too."

When I put those traits together, they felt only faintly related. I drank my coffee to distract from what felt like a half-baked remark.

When I put it that way, it was as though I didn't know anything about her except that she walked fast prior to eating at her apartment.

There ought to be more to say, but I couldn't really come up with anything.

"A fast walker and a good cook...so she's talented *and* athletic, huh?"

“That’s a generous interpretation.”

When I watched Edamoto-san move around, I got the impression she leaned much more toward the latter.

“A friend of yours, huh... She *is* a friend, right?”

“What else would she be?”

I knew what Koito-san meant by her question, but I feigned ignorance anyway.

Edamoto-san seemed very fond of me, but I hadn’t thought too deeply about what sort of fondness it was exactly.

I brushed against the surface of the thought, but only looked at it vaguely, never focusing fully.

My mind was trying to avoid thinking about it directly.

Perhaps it was certain subtle behaviors of hers, or some kind of instincts of my own, or emotions deep down that I had yet to sort out... Whatever the case, my thoughts on Edamoto-san were still unclear.

Edamoto-san *was* a friend, but she was somehow different from my other college friends.

Though it was easy enough to put that much into words, I...

“I think I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“Right. Perhaps if the opportunity presents itself.”

In spite of my response, I wondered what kind of situation would ever bring Edamoto-san, Koito-san, and I to the same place.

What kind of relationship would lead to that happening?

I couldn’t even guess.

I filled my short periods of free time with the school library and newspapers.

Past the card reader, in the space immediately to the left, there were four benches. I sat at one of them and spread out a newspaper we didn’t get delivered at home. The thick carpet spread over the library floor absorbed sound, so footsteps disappeared into silence. It made the presence of other people seem distant.

Though there was a TV set up close by, the volume was low to

match the atmosphere in the library, so I could only just barely make the sound out. There were science magazines lined to one side. Though I had picked them up before, I was uninformed when it came to science, so I just couldn't get into them. From a young age, I think my interest in subjects—or lack thereof—has always been very black and white.

That applied not only to things but to people as well. When it came to other's names and preferences, I couldn't retain any of that information unless I had an interest in them.

I wondered how many encounters I had forgotten up until now.

Even when it came to newspapers, my eyes would only actually go to topics I was interested in. That was actually quite useful.

When my fingertips touched the newspaper, they came away smelling of paper. Lately, it was a smell that I encountered less often than usual.

Perhaps I should go buy a book sometime soon.

I folded the newspaper, put it away, and stood up. As I was about to leave, I took a glance at the TV on my way past. At the moment, it was showing a swimmer being interviewed as she waited her turn for a competition. It seemed that she had just come out of the pool; water was dripping from her entire body. Her exposed skin was deeply tanned, as though she had experienced summer ahead of the rest of us.

How had she gotten so burned when she presumably practiced in an indoor pool?

I was about to keep walking without giving it any further thought, until she pulled off her swim cap. Her hair came loose from the cap's protection, falling just past her ears.

Damp, smooth-looking, silky black hair.

“.....”

I stopped.

“I love swimming.”

That was her answer to why she had started swimming. It didn't seem like a very sophisticated reason.

But perhaps it is important to have such an honest, keen awareness of what you love most.

“*And also,*” she went on. “*In the past, I saw something very pretty in*

the water. So...um, yeah, I guess you could say I just really like swimming.”

She repeated herself in the latter half with an air of frustration at her own lack of eloquence, which invited a chuckle from the interviewer. Then the short segment ended, and they immediately moved on to the next topic.

I absentmindedly stared at the screen, my half-open eyes barely registering the next piece of footage.

...*Hmm.*

“.....*Hmm.*”

It was like perusing an old letter you’d long forgotten you received.

“What’s wrong?” Edamoto-san was suddenly standing at my side, looking at the screen with me. “Are you that unhappy about tomorrow’s weather?”

“...What are you talking about?”

I feigned innocence at Edamoto-san’s inquiry, but she pressed on, evidently concerned.

“You just looked kinda serious.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“But you still...all right, fine. Anyway, hello, Sayaka-senpai.”

Taking a step ahead of me, my speedy underclassman peered into my face as she greeted me. I wondered whether I should point out that she was speaking a bit too loudly for the hushed atmosphere of the library.

“Hello.”

“Sayaka-senpai, wanna go to the pool?”

“What for, all of a sudden?”

“Since you were just staring at a pool athlete.”

I wondered how long she had been watching me. Also, the phrase “pool athlete” didn’t sound quite right.

“Edamoto-san, I thought you didn’t read books?” I asked, thinking it was odd for her to show up in the library.

“You can call me Haru.”

“...Edamoto.”

“For some reason, when you say my last name without the ‘san,’ it feels kinda bossy.”

Edamoto-san ducked her head but immediately straightened up again.

“But you said that you read newspapers at the library, so yeah...”

I guess she was listening to what I said at her apartment the other day.

“Sometimes I peek in, and today I just happened to find you. That’s all.”

Edamoto-san concluded and faced forward. Maybe she had actually been checking every day since then, since it seemed like I’d run into her an awful lot lately. Since we hadn’t been in touch about it either, it was difficult to just chalk everything up to chance.

But I purposefully didn’t mention that and walked side by side with her.

I supposed that in theory, whether we met intentionally or by coincidence, it was all the same.

“It is the right weather for going to the pool.”

The moment we took a step out of the library, the sheer heat prompted me to blurt that out immediately.

The cries of the swarming cicadas on the abundant trees of the college were coming from every direction.

The light beamed down on us from a sharp angle.

In the middle of July, the seething summer seemed to hang over us.

“Yeah, true. Then we should go, Sayaka-chan!”

“Don’t call me that, please.” I gently rebuked my underclassman for getting a bit carried away.

Sayaka-chan, she says... I quietly chuckled when she didn’t seem to be looking.

“I obviously don’t have the right equipment to go on the spot, but let’s do it someday.”

I wasn’t like an elementary-school kid who would just have pool

stuff on hand.

But still, the pool...

When I was in high school, I went with all the members of the student council, but...my bathing suit...that might work, no, wait... I battled the flow of time in my head.

Then, as I put that aside, the heat and the hesitation both came back to me.

For some reason, we ended up turning left—nothing more than an impulse, but I had no idea where we might be headed.

As we left the library behind and passed by the co-op, I started to feel anxious about our lack of direction.

Lecture...right, I needed to get to my next lecture.

With this belated realization, I looked at Edamoto-san.

“Someday, huh... Oh, right. Would you like to come over to eat again?”

She kept bouncing from one topic to the next. And now, perhaps also noticing that we had no destination, she proposed one on the spot.

“Hmm. But I believe I was just over again two days ago...”

I had already been treated to Edamoto-san’s cooking a grand total of three times. It was delicious and close to the college, and she invited me, and...I kept searching for excuses.

As though I was trying to keep from looking at something.

“Then how about today, too?!”

“Sorry, but I already ate today.”

“Aw, darn.”

Edamoto-san, who had been gaining momentum, almost appeared to shrink with disappointment.

“But someday soon.”

“Ahaha, Sayaka-senpai, you’re so grown-up.”

I tilted my head from the sunlight, and from Edamoto-san’s shamelessly cheerful smile as she said my name.

“Grown-up?”

“Because you keep saying *someday*.”

Was she unhappy because I kept making such promises? She sounded amused, so it was difficult to tell.

But I wasn't sure what she meant by "grown-up."

Since my parents were people who didn't make half-hearted promises, I didn't have that kind of impression of adults.

If anything, I thought my habit of prolonging such things could be described as "cagey."

"There are so many things happening *someday* that I'm looking forward to them all."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"Maybe a little. But for the most part, I'm serious, so..."

Edamoto-san trailed off, her eyes on the other side of the street. Ahead, on a thin path between buildings, there was a boisterous group of girls walking exactly opposite of us. Edamoto-san's eyes fixed on one of the girls among them, who was watching her as well. Then Edamoto-san flashed a friendly smile, and the other girl appeared to hunch her shoulders.

The girl's eyes shifted from Edamoto-san to me, walking next to her.

"Hey," Edamoto-san called, raising her hand lightly. The girl nodded slightly, then turned away and kept walking. I could tell from the way her lips moved as her friends looked to her that she was making some excuse.

It seemed like a strange reaction for someone who was presumably a friend or acquaintance.

"Weird."

Edamoto-san gave a troubled smile as the girl walked away. Then she lowered her hand and faced forward again, as though nothing had happened. Even when I peered at her face, she showed no signs of feeling down in the dumps.

She was cheerful and open, just like always. That was how I saw Edamoto-san.

I found myself curious about the awkward encounter, and her cheerfulness in spite of it.

I wasn't so uninterested in Edamoto-san that I could completely ignore such a thing.

But it seemed to run deep. I had a hunch that taking a step into Edamoto-san's business would end up being a very large leap.

Should I ask her or should I not? As I walked, I hesitated a bit.

"Was that an acquaintance of yours?"

"No."

She shook her head at first. But then, after a short pause, she nodded instead.

"Yeah, she is—an acquaintance."

Her mouth stayed open for a moment, and then she added another correction.

"A friend."

After this upward revision, the only sound for a while was our footsteps.

"Or at least, she was."

She made one last addition. Her relationship with this girl seemed to be quite complicated at present.

"It looks like she doesn't want to be friends anymore. I mean, we haven't talked at all."

Though her tone insisted that it wasn't a big deal, I found that even more intriguing than her usual dramatic invitations. It was like reverse psychology, though surely not intentional.

Curiosity and thirst for knowledge. Clearly, I had a weakness for anything that appealed to those parts of me.

Thinking about it, it might've even been curiosity about the mystery of my first meeting with Edamoto-san that was motivating me to do things like this.

I needed to get to my next lecture, and I was pretty much heading in the wrong direction.

"....."

But I didn't stop walking. It were as though my feet had other ideas about where I wanted to go.

In spite of the intense heat beating down on us, the light sweat forming on my back was accompanied by something like chills.

I'd never skipped out on a lesson before.

I was tense to the point that my fingertips seemed to go slightly numb.

I stopped and changed direction.

"Huh? Did you remember something you had to do?"

Edamoto-san stopped on the spot, seemingly hesitant about whether to follow me.

So I invited her, "Come with me."

As I moved my head, the strong cries of cicadas flew into my ears from the other side of the day. Edamoto-san paused for a moment and then lit up in a smile. "Cool, cool, cool," she announced, running back to my side in a flash.

"Don't you have a lecture?"

"Not anymore."

I had erased it from my plans, for better or worse. Even though I was skipping, I felt strangely positive about it.

In contrast, I remembered the tepid feeling of the day when I said I wanted to quit swimming.

I had run away with a sense of guilt that time, but now my heart was feeling completely the opposite.

Perhaps this feeling had prompted me to recall those memories clearly, when they'd been vague for so many years.

"Wait, not anymore...? Uhh, I feel kinda bad... Are you sure?"

"It'll be fine if I take just one day off."

After all, my friend who attended lectures so sporadically last year had survived into her second year without a hitch.

In the past, I was always hyper-vigilant of making even a single mistake. But even though I had piled up many failures until now, I was still alive, and even smiling.

That was why I knew it was fine—why I kept going forward.

And so, I led the way behind the lecture building. It was the

smoking area that tended to smell, where trees had been planted as though to enclose it.

The very place where I first met Edamoto-san.

I glanced at the bench, positioned such that it seemed to carry the burden of the wall's shadow and then looked at Edamoto-san.

"Wow, this takes me back."

Edamoto-san jokingly stood by the wall, where she'd been when we first met. "Something like this, right?" Then, though she wasn't crying, she rubbed her eyes.

"Was that girl from earlier related to why you were crying that day?"

Edamoto-san's eyes went wide.

"Sayaka-senpai, are you psychic?"

I remembered Koito-san's flustered face when she expressed similar doubts during our last meetup, and smiled a little.

"Anyone could guess as much."

I sat down on the bench, leaned my back against it, and breathed out a little sigh.

The hard sensation that I felt on my back through my clothes and the fragrance of the trees reminded me of the student council building.

"Go on." I patted the bench next to me. Edamoto-san cradled her bag as she sat.

"I was happy you let me have this place back then... No, that's not quite right. I was embarrassed."

Edamoto-san closed her eyes and let the edge of her mouth slacken slightly, as if reminiscing.

"Once I was alone, I didn't want anyone to see me crying, but I ended up wondering why I felt that way. I don't think crying is really such a bad thing."

I remembered Edamoto-san's face when we had reunited in the lecture room. Her nose was red, but she wasn't crying anymore.

"Why, then?"

I was curious. Edamoto-san answered right away.

"I think it's probably because I don't want to show people my weak side."

"Your weak side?"

I thought over the words she had chosen.

"I felt like if I seemed weak, people wouldn't like me."

Her face had a shadow over it as she smiled, filled with loneliness.

She has a point, I thought at first. If someone is weak, cries easily, and can't live without relying on others... I might think poorly of that kind of person.

But people cry when they're happy, too. It has nothing to do with how strong or weak they are.

So I didn't know for sure whether crying meant exposing your weakness.

I sank into silence for a bit, but there was still sound all around us.

The cicadas were loud. The cicadas were crying—so that they could live.

With voices stronger than anyone.

The first one of us to speak was Edamoto-san.

"It's a little hot, isn't it?"

"A little?"

My hair, absorbing the sun all this time, complained that it was more than a little hot. The sunlight seemed to be creeping closer, spreading even into the shade.

"I chose this spot on a whim, but would you rather talk somewhere else?"

"No, here is fine."

Edamoto-san's eyes crinkled up, showing her happiness.

"Besides, we're alone and all."



Beneath the sky, the confines of the buildings around us seemed relatively distant. And yet, in spite of all that space, Edamoto-san and I were the only ones there. The wall of sound formed by the cicadas' voices barred all other footsteps, erasing their existence. Yes, of course —we really *were* alone.

In that space with just the two of us, Edamoto-san made a rare show of shyness.

“Mind if I talk about myself a bit?”

“That’s what I came here to talk about.”

That was one thing I would never learn in a lecture. Edamoto-san hid her mouth with her bag.

“Well, you might’ve guessed something like this already, but...” Edamoto-san hugged the bag closer and went very stiff. “The first day I met you, Sayaka-senpai, she had just dumped me.”

I felt something snap, like putting my finger on a taut thread.

I hesitated, wondering whether to leap up or remain still. In that moment, my skin and voice lost their warmth.

“Oh, I see.”

My response ended up being clipped. For a lot of reasons, I was on guard.

“She said that since coming to college, she felt self-conscious about how others saw two girls being together, I guess... Something like that, anyway”

What an awful reason. Internally, I sympathized with Edamoto-san.

I’m sure that her mind must have gone blank when she heard those words. She probably barely heard the girl’s voice after that, without clearly knowing whether the reason was rage or the sense of loss.

I could imagine it as clearly as if it had happened to me.

“I was sad enough to cry back then, but I’m not bothered by it one bit now. Though I might be a little upset that we can’t be friends anymore, I think.”

Her tone sounded indifferent, as if she’d simply accepted reality. It would be strange to try to transition straight into a friendship after

breaking up, so of course there was awkwardness still between them.

If it were me, I don't think I would even want to go back to being friends.

Once a relationship transformed, going back to the way it used to be was incredibly difficult. My decision not to forgive Senpai was one example. Relationships were like piling up rocks, one after another. There was an element of chance...something that made each one unique. If the stack crumbled, then purposefully piling it back up by hand in the exact same way was close to impossible.

People can't just start something over.

That was why my best friend had been just that from the time I met her, and was still my friend even now.

Nothing wavered in that relationship.

Nothing changed, no matter how much I wished it would.

"Well, that's all there is to that story."

"It's got to be more complicated than that, hasn't it?"

"Nope, not anymore."

Edamoto-san looked at me and smiled meaningfully. The eyes of my underclassman's young face seemed to be at the same height as mine, I thought.

"So yeah, I like girls."

"...I see."

I felt the surface of concrete within my voice. I didn't know when that might begin to crack.

"So..." Edamoto-san started to say something and stopped. I couldn't bring myself to press her to continue.

The rest of the sentence was lost, as if our voices had been sucked into a vacuum.

"But since that led me to you, Sayaka-senpai, I just think...that's pretty amazing."

"Amazing?"

When I expressed my doubt at her sudden lack of vocabulary, Edamoto-san averted her eyes somewhat bashfully.

“It’s like we were connected by something...umm...I dunno, exciting, I guess?”

Edamoto-san’s eyebrows drew upward, and she looked to the sky in consternation.

“It’d be kinda dramatic to call it destiny, but I can’t think of any other way to put it.”

“...Like we were fated to meet?”

“Right, that. A cute-meet.”

You’ve got the order of that wrong. I hesitated a bit over whether to point that out. But we were away from lecture, certainly not in a grammar class, and we were having a very serious discussion... My train of thought was trying to run away from the topic at hand.

“Back then, um...I saw you through my tears, Sayaka-senpai, and you were really pretty. That’s all.”

Edamoto-san put her hand on the bench and stretched out her legs. The bag she’d been clutching was still crumpled up as it sat on her knees. She looked like a cat hunching its neck.

“You were so pretty...”

“Don’t say it twice—you’ll embarrass me.”

Edamoto-san smiled a little, as if she’d been hoping for that reaction.

“I think you can repeat compliments lots of times and never get tired of hearing ’em, either.”

That manner of thinking was very typical Edamoto-san. I had gotten to understand her to the point that I knew this much—at least, it seemed that way to me. Yes, that’s why I had come here.

Because I wanted to know about Edamoto-san herself, and hear her story.

Now what?

Since I had now stepped partway in, what should I do next?

Now what? I was stuck on the question.

I needed to face what came next.

As the scorching summer heat drew ever closer...

“So, Sayaka-senpai...”

While I was still agonizing, Edamoto-san spoke up first. She really never hesitated to make her move.

“What is it?”

“Your hair is long, huh?”

Edamoto-san’s eyes were on the back of my neck.

“It is...”

Since graduating from high school, I’d gotten the occasional trim but never cut it short.

It wasn’t as though anyone would actually say this, but I didn’t want anyone to think that I cut it because I’d had my heart broken.

I hated that I felt that way, but I just kept letting my hair grow longer.

“What about it?” I asked Edamoto-san.

“I like it.”

As Edamoto-san said that, she stood up from the bench. Her voice and movements were light.

The affection that she had put out there as though it were no big deal reached me slowly, like a drifting balloon.

And by the time it touched my heart and began to push, Edamoto-san was already moving.

After putting some distance between us with her quick pace, Edamoto-san turned around and waved her hand at me with a smile.

Though we had parted ways a number of times, it was very rare for Edamoto-san to be the one to leave me, I thought.

“Well, thank you for that...”

I watched her leave and only finally murmured that once I was alone, touching the hair flowing down my neck.

It was the evidence of my past that still remained within me just a little—and she said that she *liked* it.

Like.

The faint echo made the cicadas’ cries seem distant.

I was bewildered—as though she had confessed her love to me.

And maybe, just maybe, she had.

>>*Are your cats doing well?*<<

>*They are.*<

>*Both of them.*<

>*But they're taking it easy since they're getting older, of course.*<

>>*Taking it easy, huh?*<<

>>*I wonder if they'd let me hold them now.*<<

>*They're still quick when they're running from that.*<

>>*Well, it's good they still have energy.*<<

>*Yeah.*<

>>*I'd like to see them again.*<<

>*That would be nice.*<

>>*And you.*<<

>>*I feel like there's a lot of things*<<

>>*I want to talk to you about.*<<

>*I...<*

>*Yes, me too.*<

>*That might be nice.*<

>>*Someday then.*<<

>*Yes, someday.*<

July twenty-ninth, on the morning of my birthday, the same

muggy heat swept over us as the last few days.

It was a summer morning not much different from the one before, and likely the following morning as well.

I had turned twenty.

When I picked up the phone by my pillow, I'd already received celebratory messages. They were from Midori and Manaka. When I checked the timestamp, they had come with the sunrise—the pair must have gotten up pretty early. They had sent them together. Midori and Manaka were sharing a place, so one of them probably woke up the other. Since she had written “happy birthday” twice, Midori had probably still been half-asleep.

In any case, I was happy.

I hadn't gotten a message from Edamoto-san. That was only natural—she didn't know my birthday any more than I knew hers. Neither of us knew much about the other. I'd just learned one more fact about her recently.

Though that single fact seemed like quite a significant one.

I wondered if it was something she should have spoken about so readily.

She must have felt that it was safe to talk to me about it, but why?

“.....”

Maybe Edamoto-san's eyes were truly able to see me clearly.

Just as I'd been able to tell that Koito-san had stayed over at Touko's house.

Did I have my own mannerisms that allowed people to notice a difference in my demeanor?

As I sat there, I thought about Edamoto-san.

I was very aware that I'd been doing this with growing frequency of late.

Maybe it was like a running start. Like something nostalgic was starting to come into view once again.

I turned to the ceiling, as if to look up at the unviewable stars. I hugged one of my knees and swayed on top of the chair. If I just stayed perfectly still here, I could make it through the day gently, normally,

without anything happening at all.

As tempting as that sounded, I squinted as though I were looking at a distant wave.

I felt the slight compulsion to try telling her it was my birthday.

Maybe she wouldn't like it because it was like I was demanding her to congratulate me. But for some reason, I felt that I needed to tell her now rather than after the fact. I had the faint understanding that Edamoto-san would be happy about that.

There was a part of me somewhere that sought that happiness.

I half-closed my eyes as I fidgeted with my phone, maybe a subconscious way of hiding my embarrassment.

"I've turned twenty."

I sent it, waited a moment to see if it would be marked "read", then put my phone down.

The reply came about thirty minutes later. She had probably just woken up.

>>*Your birthday?*<<

>>*Today?*<<

>*Yes.*<

>>*Why would you do that to me...*<<

>*Do what?*<

>>*I can't prep anything if you tell me the day of!*<<

>>*If you'd told me at least three days ago...*<<

>>*Even yesterday would have been great...*<<

>*Prep for what?*<
>*You don't need to do anything.*<

>>*Sorry, I should have congratulated you first.*<<

>>Happy birthday, Senpai.<<

>Thank you.<

>I know this is a cliché line, but...<

>Just wishing me a happy birthday is more than enough.<

>Although it sort of feels like I forced you.<

>>No, no.<<

>>I mean, a little, but...<<

>>I think gift-giving is as much for the giver as the receiver.<<

>>Like, you want to give a good impression.<<

>>And it feels nice to receive something too, right?<<

>Well, I suppose so.<

>>Exactly!<<

>>...So is there anything you want?<<

>Not in particular right now...<

>I just wanted to hear “happy birthday”.<

>Specifically, from you<

>...Edamoto-san?<

>You’re not answering.<

>Did you fall back asleep?<

>>No, no, no!<<

>>I’m awake!<<

>>Which means this isn’t a dream...<<

>What are you talking about?<

>>I guess I’m just happy.<<

>>More importantly...<<

>>So you’re twenty starting today, Sayaka-senpai.<<

> Right. <

>> You can drink now. <<

> Yes. <

>> You can also smoke. <<

>> You can gamble at pachinko parlors all you want. <<

> I wouldn't do any of those things. <

> Your idea of adulthood <

> is kind of childish, Edamoto-san. <

>> You can call me Haru. <<

>> Have you drank before, Sayaka-senpai? <<

> Of course I haven't. <

>> You're so straightlaced. <<

> Have you, Edamoto-san? <

>> Edamoto-san has not. <<

> Aren't you a model student. <

>> Yup. <<

>> Wanna try it, then? <<

> Hm? <

>>I thought maybe we could drink to celebrate your twentieth? <<
>>Oh, I'll buy the booze. It'll be a birthday celebration. <<

>Alcohol, huh...<
>But you can't drink yet, can you?<
>Oh, unless you took a gap year or something.<

>>Nope.<<
>>Guess I'll go for broke and drink some coke. <<

>Go for broke?<

>>I realized that I haven't had one since I moved. <<
>>But I do like the bubbles.<<

>Um...I see.<
>Drinking, though...<
>I wasn't expecting to do it, so I don't know if I'm emotionally prepared.<

>>Want to drink in my room then? <<

>At your apartment, Edamoto-san?<

>>Just Haru's fine. <<
>>But yeah, since I don't know any places where you can drink during the day. <<

>I suppose I don't, either.<
>Oh, maybe a family restaurant?<

>>In theory, maybe... <<
>>Is beer okay? <<

>*I'm not sure what you mean by "in theory".*<

>*But all right...<*

>*I'll leave it up to you.*<

>>*Okey-dokey.*<<

>*See you later, then.*<

Things had taken a strange turn. Strange...yes, let's go with that.

Regardless, I got ready to head out. Even though I hadn't particularly planned to go outside today, I ended up doing a complete circuit all around my room in a fluster. While I was moving, I looked out the window outside to confirm that the world was still radiant. The strong sunlight out there reminded me of Edamoto-san. Maybe it was because of her disposition.

Drinking, though... I thought as I picked up my commuter pass.

Would this really be all right? I wouldn't drink too much and embarrass myself somehow, would I? Since I didn't even know how much I *could* drink, there were too many unknown variables. As I clattered around the room, something like nervousness sprouted within me.

But at the same time, I felt a bit uplifted, too.

I was a little excited about celebrating my birthday with someone other than family.

I finished preparing and peeked into the living area to tell my family my plans before I left, where I found my grandmother. She and the cats had aged just like the worn-out chair, yet they were still a reliable part of the scenery. My grandmother noticed me.

"I'm going out for a bit."

"Oh, but I thought you didn't have school today?"

Her voice, her attitude, and her bearing hadn't changed one bit. It felt the same as when she used to ask whether I had classes. To my grandmother, perhaps I wasn't much different from when I had been in elementary school, either.

“I don’t, but...I’m going to see a friend.”

“How unusual.”

As though seeking agreement from the cat, she looked down at the drowsy feline.

“Unusual... Yes, I suppose.”

That was probably true. The student council hadn’t worked on the weekends, either.

“Oh, right.” Before I headed to the entryway, I asked my grandmother, “Does alcohol taste good?”

My grandmother narrowed her eyes. The cat on her knees also waved its tail as it looked at me.

“Have fun, dear.”

My grandmother’s reply was indirect, perhaps even off the mark, as she seemed to gaze into the distance.

I hesitated over what to say for a moment and then simply agreed, “Okay.”

“Honesty is the best policy.” My grandmother, who always had a slightly twisted side, wrinkled even more as she smiled.

“It’s okay for minors to buy beer if they’re not drinking it, right?”

“It’s not illegal, I don’t think.”

I wasn’t confident, even though I was technically in the law department at school.

“Well, I already bought it anyway.” Picking up the shopping bag she’d left on the sink, Edamoto-san shrugged. “I was worried that I might get in trouble, so I bought it at the supermarket’s self-checkout.”

As I watched Edamoto-san pull out cans of beer one after another from the bag, I unintentionally let out a snicker.

“Huh? No good?”

Edamoto-san looked flustered, clearly misunderstanding the reason I’d burst out laughing. “No, no.” I shook my head gently. “It’s just that I feel like we’re playing grown-up together.”

For some reason, I was tickled by the sense that we were playing

at a park or something.

At that, Edamoto-san too broke into a smile. On closer inspection, I noticed that fresh sweat had appeared on her forehead.

“You can call me Haru.”

“...Edamoto-san.”

I thought about it a bit, but I couldn’t come up with a clever comeback.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to drink all this, though.”

I looked at the ten or so cans she had set down like bowling pins, a bit distressed. If there was extra left over, who was supposed to drink it? “No worries.” Edamoto-san carried some cans to the room.

As I grabbed the remaining cans, I cocked my head, wondering whether these were supposed to be chilled before drinking them.

When you look closely enough, even the most mundane scene can be full of mysteries.

Having beckoned me to her room, Edamoto-san inquired, “So, do you feel any different now that you’re an adult?”

“Not really...it isn’t much different from any other birthday.”

Although celebrating with a friend like this was something I hadn’t done in a long time.

“What about your birthday?”

“March. I was cutting it pretty close.”

After sitting down, Edamoto-san exclaimed, “Oh, right!” and ran back to the sink. She darted out of and back into the room with big bounds. I was still fairly young myself, but Edamoto-san’s movements were just so, well...nimble.

I felt like Edamoto-san still had something that most people lost as they grew out of childhood. She held two glasses in her hands as she came back.

Looking closer, I saw that there was a single coke mixed in among the beer cans lined up on the table. I suppose that was hers.

“Cutting it close, you said?”

“If I’d been born a month later, I would’ve been another grade lower...and then I probably wouldn’t have met you, Sayaka-senpai.”

Edamoto-san put a glass down in front of me as she spoke of what she apparently considered a stroke of good fortune.

“Although I guess it’s silly to speculate like that.”

She negated that supposition immediately. Perhaps she was recalling her breakup shortly after starting college.

“Since no one can see what would have happened otherwise, everything is fate, and everything is inevitable. At least, that’s what I think.”

“You may be right about that.”

It wasn’t as though such thoughts had never entered my mind—thoughts of what would have happened if I hadn’t made the wrong decision.

Her smiling face would be there and mine next to hers. It was a scene from a dream.

Then again, I no longer thought of my current self as a mistake.

March, though, hmm? Perhaps that was the origin of her name, Haru—written with the kanji for sunshine but pronounced the same way as the Japanese word for spring.

Although the sunlight was bright as ever, the temperature in the room was just a tad too low. Edamoto-san picked up a beer can and opened it. I held out the glass to her, and she poured the contents in for me. I was fairly certain there was a specific way of pouring it, but since I didn’t know what that was, I couldn’t voice my opinion.

The golden liquid poured into the glass I always used, with the rainbow visible at the bottom.

“I feel like you would be more of a wine person than a beer person though, Sayaka-senpai.”

“What kind of image do you even have of me?”

“You swirling your glass in one hand like this...”

Edamoto-san played the part of me, gestures and all. It seemed that I was supposed to be wearing a bathrobe and holding a glass of wine in one hand. From my perspective, it was an impersonation that bore absolutely no resemblance to me.

“Excuse you.”

I'd never even worn a bathrobe before. Who wore those nowadays?

"I'm just joking. Oh, I know I texted this already, but happy birthday."

After pouring coke into her own glass, Edamoto-san sat down, folding her legs underneath her.

"Thank you."

As a result of telling her my birthday, I was at Edamoto-san's apartment, about to have a drink-a-thon with her.

What a strange situation, I thought to myself, not for the first time today.

Maybe Edamoto-san would say that this wasn't coincidence but fate.

If all of this were inevitable, that meant I had no way of deciding anything.

Technically, I should still be able to decide whether to drink the beer in my glass or not.

But if I wasn't going to drink it, then what in the world had I come here for, really? After I had Edamoto-san buy so much alcohol... though I hadn't asked her to buy so much. But she had done it to celebrate me.

I couldn't just reject that.

I see... So I really don't have any choice but to drink it now.

Perhaps our paths really are all laid out for us from the start.

"Cheers." We lightly clinked our glasses. Although Edamoto-san hit mine with such alarming force, it wasn't really light at all.

When I brought the glass to my face, the sour smell of alcohol struck my nose.

The booze-filled glass felt sorely out of place in my hand.

And then, for the first time in my life, I sipped alcohol.

The life-changing taste I formally experienced as a twenty-year-old was—*gross*.

"....."

I quietly righted the tipped glass.

Then I managed to swallow.

“It’s sour.”

Before I even said it out loud, the taste had likely shown on my face.

Edamoto-san was already wincing a little.

“That bad?”

“Much worse than I ever imagined.”

Since adults drank it without any issue, I thought it would have a slightly milder taste.

The aftertaste stayed persistently in my throat, almost as if it were trying to creep back up to my tongue.

To put it bluntly, it tasted terrible.

“This is the first time I’ve come to your place and had something that wasn’t delicious.”

The well over half-full glass of beer that still remained was literally repulsive. I was already almost gagging.

When I moved that glass aside, I saw Edamoto-san, her eyes and mouth round.

“What’s wrong?”

As I looked at her, Edamoto-san’s cheeks lightly changed color.

“Nothing, ha ha... You really are a grown up.”

Edamoto-san grinned and nodded to herself gleefully.

“Even though I don’t like beer?”

“No, it’s not that...but I guess that works, too.”

Edamoto-san smiled vaguely and sipped her coke.

Unlike mine, her glass was emptying.

“Mm, this cola’s great.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Do you want to trade for a little?”

“No, we shouldn’t...”

Her birthday was very far away, so she couldn't even claim to be nearly twenty. If, hypothetically, I *were* to celebrate her twentieth birthday with her, that would be quite a while from now. By that time, I wondered if I would better understand the taste of beer.

"I said this earlier, but I really don't think I can drink this many... What should we do about what's left over?"

Tap tap tap, she tapped the surface of the cans one at a time. She didn't act like she was very worried about dealing with them.

"How about we open them one at a time when you come over, Sayaka-senpai?"

"I generally only come here during lunch break between classes, though..."

I wondered what my friends would think if I opened a can of beer each lunch break and came back tipsy. I didn't think that I would be able to actually attend a lecture after drinking.

"If you don't think you can finish, then I'll just drink it for you."

"But you're underage."

"I think I could do it if I thought of it as bitter soda."

Edamoto-san grinned widely, and I absently looked at her teeth.

When I tried to keep my eyes focused straight, I felt a little sick. I wonder what that was about.

Well, putting that aside...

Not to brag, but this college was a high level one.

Unless one was incredibly lucky, it would be near-impossible to get in with half-hearted study habits.

"Oh yeah."

"What is it?"

As I nodded while tipping my glass, Edamoto-san peered at me.

"You must actually be pretty studious then, Edamoto-san."

"Huh? Isn't that rude *and* blunt?"

Edamoto-san squinted at me suspiciously. Perhaps that was an ill-advised statement.

"I didn't mean that in a bad way."

“Can you really mean that in a good way?”

“Isn’t excelling in the pursuit of knowledge a wonderful thing?”

“But you’re saying I really don’t seem like the type.”

Edamoto-san grinned, as though she were enjoying herself. She seemed to be rather self-aware.

“This might be presumptuous, but you don’t seem like you would like studying much.”

“Not particularly,” she admitted freely. “Why, do you?”

“Yes, it makes me happy to gain more knowledge.”

Whenever I learned something knew, the uncertain parts of my vision became clearer, as though I were putting on prescription glasses.

“Sayaka-senpai, you always sound so wise.”

“Are you saying I’m pretentious?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. That part of you is just really...um, yeah.”

She trailed off. I chuckled, sensing that she couldn’t find a positive way to phrase it.

I certainly did have a pretentious side. People seemed to expect it of me, so I simply responded accordingly.

But of course, I had my fair share of silly and utterly insignificant thoughts, too.

For example, I noticed that Edamoto-san was sweating quite a bit, yet I couldn’t really smell it much.

“Well, see...” Edamoto-san gulped down the rest of her cola. I was envious. “I was able to study because someone told me we should go here together. So I worked super hard.”

“...Your ex-girlfriend?”

Edamoto-san smiled and half-nodded, her ponytail bouncing with joy. “But still, all that studying was worth it. Since I got to meet you.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I was happy to have met her, too, but it was difficult for me to express my true feelings. That didn’t seem to matter to Edamoto-san, though. As I stewed on this, she grabbed a can of beer and pulled it towards herself.

“Since this doesn’t seem to suit your tastes...”

“Wait...”

Before I could protest, Edamoto-san had already cracked the can open and tilted it back. I could tell it was coursing smoothly down her throat. After a while, she pulled the can away from her mouth at last, still looking composed.

“Yup, that’s sour all right.”

She had the same impression as me but easily let it out. Unlike me, the bitterness hadn’t affected her.

“You seem like you’re used to it?” I said.

“I may have drunk some cooking alcohol before...” My underclassman averted her eyes slyly.

“So you’re actually a bad underclassman.”

“But you’re a good upperclassman, so it balances out.”

“We aren’t. This isn’t a scale. Relationships are more like...”

I tried to find a metaphor but couldn’t think of a good one. All I knew was that it wasn’t a scale. Even strangers who were irrelevant to each other could establish equilibrium.

I sank back into silence. Edamoto-san looked at me and the window as she tilted her glass. Since my body had nothing to do while we were silent, I sipped the beer little by little in spite of its sourness. As it went down my throat, I regretted that boredom-driven impulse immediately. Though I kept telling myself to stop, as soon as my attention drifted to my thoughts, the glass wound up at my lips again.

The next thing I knew, I had opened a second can.

Edamoto-san also opened a can and was pouring it into her glass, but it didn’t seem to be coke this time.

“So Sayaka...senpai...”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, go on.”

For some reason, my response to her voice was delayed. It was as though there was a bit of distance between myself and my brain.

Edamoto-san used her glass to hide her mouth, as she looked at me as if observing my behavior.

She was like a little dog showing its face as it peeked in from the

brush.

“So, I’m only asking this because I’m kinda getting drunk now, but...”

“Wait, are you drunk? I’m completely sober.”

I waved my hand back and forth. But when I looked closely, it was tilted at a strange angle. Huh?

Without letting my slight confusion show, Edamoto-san was looking straight at me.

Then, she asked me a question.

“Sayaka-senpai, do you have a girlfriend?”

Her voice quietly pressed down on my throat.

Like her earlier question, she took a step into my life, but more definitely than when she had asked whether I was seeing someone.

The cloud-like blur over my eyes was cleared away.

I was now aware of the somewhat loud sound of the air conditioning running.

How should I respond to this question? There were many ways I could evade it. I had already thought of three. But those had no guarantee of smoothing over the situation. And most importantly...

I had the feeling that, at some point, this moment would come.

Knowing that, I had met Edamoto Haru.

I put aside the option of evading her and stood head-on in front of the question.

“Can you tell that sort of thing just by looking?”

“More or less.” Edamoto-san smiled slightly. “I guess it’s kind of like the intuition of seeing a bird in the distance and knowing what kind it is.”

“That’s not intuition—it’s concrete knowledge.”

Knowledge. In the past, it was something I had relied upon. I thought that if you knew enough, everything would go well.

Even after learning that was a fantasy, I still thought that knowledge was an important thing.

But this mid-drink conversation was contained nowhere in my

knowledge or experience.

“Maybe there’s something about you that’s similar to the reflection I see in my mirror every day.”

“I wonder if that’s really how it works.”

I looked at Edamoto-san, feeling a vague, undefinable feeling. I began to understand it in the form of a hunch. It was difficult to explain what exactly I suspected it might be, but...I knew that my affections moved in ways that might be very slightly different from most other people.

That subtle discrepancy, just as Edamoto-san said, was like looking into the mirror.

“So? Do you have a girlfriend?” Edamoto-san asked again. I didn’t need to think deeply about the reason why. But I couldn’t quite say it yet.

“Not at the moment.”

“So that means you used to have one?”

I didn’t think I needed to truthfully answer that sort of question. But right now, oddly enough, there were cracks in my defenses. *Maybe it’s because of this?* I took a glance at the glass in my hand. I hadn’t drunk that much, but my vision felt floaty and hazy.

“Yes, I did, once. That was the only time I ever dated.”

When I was in high school, I’d carried an unrequited love with me for three years. It was a single, beautifully straightforward line that hadn’t connected me to anyone. And now, as that path carried on without ever connecting to my erstwhile love, it was about to intersect with a different path entirely.

Though the excessively effective air conditioning might have had something to do with it, I felt like I’d been suddenly exposed to a blast of wintery cold.

“What was she like?”

“Well...”

Since she was asking about my girlfriend rather than the person I liked for all of high school, I leapt through many years all at once to think back on the time period I needed to revisit. I passed over high school to junior high. It would be hard to say what was bitterest—

my junior high experiences or the beer I was drinking now.

I didn't want to talk much about the details of what kind of person she was. In retrospect, there were more bad sides to her than good.

"She was the exact opposite of you, Edamoto-san—for the most part." She was carefree, pale-skinned, and her words and actions always kept me guessing. I needed to stop there or I would start bad-mouthing her. My forehead wrinkled.

"Basically, umm...I'm scared to ask this, but you mean she was cute?"

Why would she be scared?

"Her face was... Well, yes, she was beautiful. I suppose I usually fall for people with lovely faces."

"And my ranking in that department would beeee..."

"Ahh...yes, I do think you're cute."

Realizing what Edamoto-san was worried about, I laughed a little despite myself. I couldn't blame her for worrying about that, I supposed.

"I'm cute, huh?" Edamoto-san rubbed her cheek and then met eyes with me. "Right...cute. I've been told that much before, at least."

"...By your old girlfriend?"

Since I was reluctant to be the only one who was being questioned, I tried asking her a question back that seemed like it would hit a sore spot. Just as I expected, Edamoto-san made a slightly sour face—even though she seemed fine with the beer.

"I don't have a girlfriend right now, though."

"Me neither. We match!" Edamoto-san agreed jokingly. "But, hmm...so she was beautiful. But it didn't work out?"

"Well, no."

Since what she loved and what I loved hadn't meshed, there was no way it could have worked out.

Regardless of that, I had fallen for her... Though by now, I'd spent more time hating her than loving her overall.

That was how my impression of Senpai had settled.

Edamoto-san chugged the contents of her glass dry all at once.

“Then maybe things would work out pretty well with me?”

My underclassman, who had put down her glass, crawled around the table on her hands and knees.

Then, she approached me.

As if to be closer to my side than anyone else.

“Because, right now, I’m in love with you.”

With that finishing blow, she opened up her heart to me completely.

Edamoto-san, literally right before my eyes, was only half-visible to me.

In the other half of my vision, I dazedly thought back to my junior high days.

I’d heard similar words before, at a similar close distance, from a different girl.

And...

“Oh, you looked away.”

“Of course I would...”

This wasn’t a distance from which friends would look at each other—not at a distance where only we would be visible to each other in the world.

And her eyes were fixed on my face, her gaze wordlessly praising it for being beautiful.

Of course it would be difficult to look back at her directly.

“Umm, so yeah...I love you.”

From outside my averted vision, Edamoto-san’s unassuming confession reached me.

“Thank you...”

Was it the effects of the alcohol making my skin feel so hot? My body temperature went up, whereas my head felt as though it had been left somewhere far away, watching the situation impassively.

Maybe it was because I had recalled the time when Yuzuki-senpai confessed to me, after burying that memory for so long.



Goosebumps ran across my skin, as though I couldn't stand the difference in temperature between my mind and body.

When I lowered my gaze, I saw that Edamoto-san's arms were shaking as they held up her weight on the floor—so much so that it felt like if I brushed her away lightly, she would fall over. As I observed Edamoto-san's nervousness, caution churned in my brain.

I did always have the vague feeling that this time would come someday.

And yet, I stayed at Edamoto-san's side without making much effort to fight it.

Maybe I had been expecting it?

Expecting what?

New love?

Or a person who understood me, with the same point of view?

I cautiously turned my gaze back toward her, like someone hiding behind a wall peeking out at the situation beyond.

Edamoto-san was still incredibly close.

She was bizarrely large in my vision, like a full moon floating in the night sky.

“Doesn’t my breath reek of alcohol?” I asked, directing the question at the reddened tip of her nose. When I tried to look at her, the scene blurred.

“I guess I smell it a little.”

“I didn’t think I’d drank that much, though... Alcohol sure is something.”

If our lips just joined each other, we would end up sharing the taste of alcohol.

That would be a little interesting, I thought.

But Edamoto-san was a minor.

Even though she smelled like alcohol, too, she was still a minor.

When I contemplated our age difference, the flush came back to my cheeks as though my head were being brought back to earth.

“Could you let me think about it?”

Looking straight at her, I asked Edamoto-san to give me a little time.

As I did so, just for a moment, I imagined a courtyard with a fountain.

“Sure.”

As she answered, Edamoto-san backed away, pushing herself along the floor. She sank back into her seat with her back crooked. The arms that had been supporting her body were shaking unsteadily at the joints.

“Well, I’m relieved you didn’t immediately turn me down, at least.”

I could tell from Edamoto-san’s face, free from its tension, that she wasn’t lying. There was a similar sensation stirring in my own heart. I’m not sure if it was that sense of relief or because I wanted to take a pause, but I washed the remaining liquid in the can down my throat.

“Ooh.”

There was a lot more left than I thought. Even though it left me flustered, I finished it off.

It definitely was very bitter, from the moment it crossed the top of my tongue until it went down my throat.

I felt the alcohol rushing through my veins. In its wake, it left a strange presence.

What was so good about this? As a fresh twenty-year-old, I really couldn’t understand it.

It seemed that even among adults, there were those who were new and those who were experienced.

“I’m going to go home for now.”

While lightly wiping my mouth with a handkerchief, I declared I was leaving.

I wanted to think alone in my room.

Yes. I’m sure I have to think this over thoroughly.

That time had come.

Was the gradual blurring in my head and eyes the result of me revolting against the sea of thoughts, or was it just the alcohol? When I

stood up, my consciousness seemed to flow downward, like sweat running down me. I started to walk absentmindedly.

Although I was out of it, it seemed my feet were firmly heading towards the entryway.

“Aren’t you drunk? Can you walk okay?”

I’m fine, I almost answered, but figured I should double-check first. I went forward and backward, switching the movements of my legs. Just as I was about to reply that I was indeed fine, I staggered.

I put my hand on the wall to catch myself, taking a deep breath before attempting to stretch my legs again.

“You *are* drunk, aren’t you?”

“I’m fine. I think that happened for a different reason.”

When I looked at the reason in question, she scratched her cheek bashfully as though she had guessed what I meant.

“Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” I said.

I exhaled lightly, and finally, managed to smile.

“I have to say...this isn’t me giving a firm answer or anything, but...” Without looking straight at Edamoto-san, I voiced my gratitude. “I didn’t know hearing those words could make me so happy.”

My barely-functioning brain tried its hardest to communicate what I knew right now, though my words were pretty clumsy.

The redness that had concentrated itself on the tip of Edamoto-san’s nose spread all the way to her cheeks and ears. I was astonished that there were so many ways to indicate affection. Behavior, voice, the movement of her eyes, and even the color of her face.

It seemed that Edamoto-san was deeply and vividly in love with me. Her love was sweet, and sought to satisfy me, but there was a part of me that doubted it. Ahh. It made me want to clasp my hands to my forehead. I’d thought I never wanted to see Senpai again, but she was still living in my heart and my mind.

“Careful on your way home.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Your limited vocabulary seems kind of suspect.”

“Really fine.”

With awful memories of Senpai in my chest, I left the apartment. If it had been winter, I might have felt a little more settled upon feeling the air outside. But instead, the unfortunate summer heat hit my cheeks and stuck unpleasantly.

The strong sunlight became strong hands and stretched out, beating down on me.

The afternoon light was faint but yellow, with night still distant. The light and alcohol collided and made my skin smart. I took a break for a bit and then moved, and moved again, proceeding in an unsteady march to the stairs. When I went down the first step, they came at me fast. I felt a certain weight pulling down on my shoulders and my core, one that I wouldn’t be conscious of normally.

Gravity was entering my world, contours and all.

As I reached the ground, I was ashamed of the weight dragging down my body. Was this why it was called getting tipsy? I was spinning around. Most of my senses spiraled. What was most worrisome was the illusion that my legs were tangling up with the ground. When I lost focus, the town spun horizontally.

Since I’d gotten caught up in the flow of celebrating my birthday, the result was this: I was drunk while it was still light out.

“Koito-san, Midori, Manaka...and Touko... If they could see me now, they’d probably never let me hear the end of it.”

I looked up at the apartment. I probably should have rested a bit before leaving.

But did I care if Edamoto-san saw? Well, yes. But Edamoto-san already knew.

It seemed this might be a birthday that neither of us would ever be able to forget.

There was a very serious situation between Edamoto-san and I right now. To let alcohol affect that would be disrespectful. I think. So, this was something I needed to go straight home to think about.

I was being overly serious as always, but I thought that was also a virtue in its own way.

Good job, me.

Although it was ridiculous to praise myself like that, somehow I felt light and relaxed.

I was even on the verge of grinning like an idiot.

Once I got to that point, I finally thought, *Oh, I really am drunk, aren't I?*

What a stupid thought—I was annoyed with myself, and a little scared.

I swore in my mind that I wouldn't drink again for a while. It was almost like I was a different person.

How could a little bit of liquid be enough to entirely rewrite my personality?

The corrosive ability of alcohol was a frightful thing.

I wondered why adults enjoyed drinking this stuff. Were they seeking a person different from who they were at the present?

As my mind grew heavy and slow, some small part of it was raising a warning.

...Ah, but this is a lot like you-know-what.

Yes. Exactly.

In my current state, I couldn't wrap my mind around difficult concepts.

All I did know was how Edamoto-san felt.

When I recalled her cheeks that had flushed red so quickly, I smiled. "Right, it is."

I knew, of course.

Even letting a single droplet spill into an endlessly vast and transparent sea would dye all of it in that color.

I knew that was love.

Setting Sail

> **I** HAD ALCOHOL yesterday. With a friend. <

>> Oh, because it was your birthday? <<

> Yes. <
> I tried beer. <

>> How was it? <<

>> I hear it's sour. <<

> That's exactly right. <

> It was so sour. <

> It didn't leave me craving more, that's for sure. <

>> You'll like it once you get used to it. <<

>> Maybe? <<

> I think I'll pass for the time being. <

>> Mine's in February, so that's still a ways away for me. <<

> I know. <
> I'm your elder by a year for now. <

>> Yours is in the summer and mine is in the winter. <<

>> Shouldn't it be the opposite? <<

> You think so? <

>> Hmm. <<

>> Actually, I guess I'm not really all that summery. <<

> Right. <

> You remind me more of spring. <

>> Why spring? <<

> Because that's when we met. <

>> Haha, fair enough. <<

>> You're the picture of winter. <<

>> Since you're composed and stuff. <<

> I don't think I'm composed, but... <

> Sure. <

> Let's go with that. <

>> That response is kind of concerning... <<

>> But right, so alcohol, huh? <<

>> I'd like to have a drink with you someday. <<

> Yes, someday. <

>> Yeah. <<

>> I hope that day really does come. <<

As I listened to the sounds coming from the once-unused second floor, I heard the musical clatter of a cup. The coffee I'd ordered had been prepared while I was preoccupied with my phone. And Miyako-san, the café manager, was smiling on the other side of the counter.

“You don’t look so hot.”

If she noticed that with just a glance, it must be terribly obvious.

The aroma drifted from the coffee cup, taking on the outline of Miyako-san's café. My cloudy vision cleared slightly.

"Something wrong? Maybe I can help a little."

"Erm..."

"It looks like something's weighing on your mind."

"Yes. A headache."

Miyako-san gave me a blank stare. She had probably meant that figuratively. But from my point of view, that was exactly what was troubling me.

"It just won't go away," I groaned as I held my forehead.

"Oh, maybe it's a summer cold?"

I shook my head. Of course that's how she would interpret things, since I looked sick, but the reality was even more miserable than that.

"I think it's probably from the drinks I had yesterday."

Since I was going off of my general knowledge, I didn't know if I'd gotten the symptoms correct. But I suspected that the source of the listlessness and headache that had plagued me since morning without relief was none other than...

"A hangover?"

"I think so. Possibly."

At my dubious expression, Miyako-san broke into a smile. She drew away for a moment, prepared something, and came back.

"In that case, start with this."

She set a glass of what looked like water down next to the coffee. When I picked it up and looked at it closely, it was a little cloudy for water. I gingerly took a sip; it wasn't the clear taste of water either, but something slightly sweeter. It tasted familiar, although I couldn't quite place it.

"It's what they call a sports drink. They're a good way to stock up on salt and sugar as well as hydration."

"Thank you..."

I was surprised she had something like that on hand. Perhaps she drank it herself.

While sipping the contents of the glass a little bit at a time, I checked the clock.

Not even a full day had passed since Edamoto-san confessed to me.

After I got home from her apartment, I flopped onto my bed and was completely unconscious until morning. I was thankful I didn't wake up in the middle of the night, but if you looked at it objectively, I had just drank alcohol, returned home, and passed out until morning. The bold debut of a twenty-year-old.

After that, I had my morning bath, and just as I began to regain my composure, I became aware of a tight pain in my temple. And now, here I was.

Miyako-san observed my current state, looking amused.

"First time?"

"Yes, I was celebrating my birthday."

"Oh, happy birthday," Miyako-san said breezily. Then her eyes wandered off. "Hmm."

"Um, is something wrong?"

"I was debating on whether to give you that coffee on the house."

"No need, but I appreciate the thought." I put down my glass and looked up. "More importantly, I sort of wanted to talk to you about something..."

I felt a sense of *déjà vu*, like this scene had happened recently. A bit too much time had passed to really call it "recent", but Miyako-san was still calm as ever as I looked up to her.

"Hmm." Miyako-san looked around the café. The tables were brimming with a type of clientele I hadn't seen before. "Could we do this after things settle down a little?"

"Yes."

"Sorry I have to do this when you have a hangover, but just hang in there for a little."

Does my hangover really have anything to do with it? I wanted to refute her, but when I turned, a sharp pain seemed to pierce the back of my head. It seemed the hangover was deeply relevant after all. Though I think there were other reasons besides the alcohol that my eyes and

head were spinning, I couldn't deny that I'd been rash about my drinking.

I think my usual self would have done more research before actually drinking.

Maybe I had been a little too excited.

Thus, I obediently waited for Miyako-san. It was so busy, I actually felt bad for overstaying my visit on just a single cup of coffee. Miyako-san had told me before that having a thriving café was a dream of hers, and it seemed to me that her dream had really come true. I watched the scene over the rim of my coffee cup, and suddenly a thought came to mind.

Have I ever had a dream come true up until now?

My headache calmed down a little while I was waiting. *Now having a serious conversation shouldn't be too difficult*, I thought.

“Sorry for the wait. Oh, by the way—when it comes to drinking alcohol, it's best to do it after you've got something in your stomach,” Miyako-san returned to me while wiping her hands, then gave me some unprompted advice.

“I won't be drinking for a while, but thank you...”

“I thought the same thing when I started drinking.”

As Miyako-san smiled at me, I couldn't help thinking that she seemed like a higher-level adult than me; perhaps I still had some childish parts left myself. These divisions were more complicated than just “child” versus “adult”—there must be many more levels and delineations of adulthood, too.

I had come to this café because I thought of her as such an adult.

With my hand still adorning the cup, I cast my eyes down a little and spoke. “Someone confessed their feelings to me the other day.”

“Oh?”

Having said that, I realized it was actually just yesterday, not “the other day.” But there was no need to get hung up on such minor details.

Miyako-san leaned forward and positioned herself to listen closely.

“Who was it? Someone at college?”

“Yes. A first year—one year below me.”

“Is she cute? Or more on the beautiful side?”

Based on the way she asked that and smiled, it seemed like she had particular examples in mind for both options.

Considering the people who had come to the café with me in the past, I could guess who she was thinking of immediately. But Edamoto-san didn’t look like either of those two at all. It also seemed that she was assuming the person who had confessed to me was a girl. *Well, I suppose that makes sense*, I thought.

Because if it had been a guy, I probably wouldn’t be agonizing about it this much.

“If I had to pick one, then I think she’s on the cute side.”

And the women that I had fallen for until now had been on the beautiful side.

I wondered which type Edamoto-san preferred. I had kind of seen her ex-girlfriend’s face before, but it was just a glance, so I couldn’t remember what she looked like in detail. Thinking about it, my interest levels really are an extreme contrast.

I have a surprisingly clear recollection of things that interest me, but things that don’t interest me blur and drift into oblivion.

“Since you don’t know what to do, that means you don’t dislike this person, right?”

“Well, no.”

If anything... I started to say, but then I questioned myself. If anything, what?

Why had that particular phrase sprung to mind right away? I didn’t think I felt such strong affection for her that I would jump to *If anything, quite the opposite*, or something like that.

“Someone confessed to me in junior high once, too...”

“Well, aren’t you popular,” she teased. In point of fact, I had been confessed to several times in high school, too, but that wasn’t important.

“Back then, we dated even though I didn’t know what it meant to like someone... I ended up falling for that person after the fact, but it didn’t end well. She was the one who confessed to me—and the one

who broke up with me.”

That might be why I was automatically suspicious to no small degree whenever someone showed me affection.

And yet, I myself fell for people so easily.

I think that I’m actually pretty soft on myself when it comes to that.

“And you’re worried it’ll happen again?”

“A little.”

Each time you failed at something, you would become wiser and more cowardly. My grandmother had once said something like that. And indeed, that was exactly what I was doing right now.

But I was sure that becoming wiser wasn’t a bad thing.

“It’s just that this time, I’m worrying about it optimistically. ...It’s a strange way to put it, but that’s what I’m feeling.”

Something was definitely different this time around. I wanted to think that the difference was that I had gotten smarter.

“Right.”

Miyako-san’s response was gentle. That hadn’t changed since I had met her.

Though she could be a bit teasing at times.

“It’s all right if you worry about it a lot. I think that sincerity of yours is charming.”

“Thank you.”

It felt nice to be complimented so readily. Miyako-san had that rare trait of being good at praising others. Maybe it was because she worked in the service industry.

“I’m not quite asking for advice, but even talking about it like this does make me feel better.”

“Of course...”

I really did mean it. It wasn’t like Miyako-san was going to particularly give me advice.

An animal trapped in a cage is bound to become disgruntled. Thoughts are living things, too. They can’t be locked up forever.

“College, though, eh? That seems like so long ago now.”

She began to count on her fingers one by one but stopped in the middle of that as though she had realized something.

Then she looked up at me and laughed lightheartedly at my expression in response to what I’d just witnessed.

“Ahahahaha.”

“Ahaha...”

We laughed deliberately and forcefully, putting it behind us.

“That reminds me, I know a certain someone who once started dating a person because one never knows until they try it out.”

“You mean Hakozaki-sensei?”

Miyako-san didn’t reply but smiled as though she were reminiscing about something.

“You really are making the most of your youth,” she teased me lightly, but I felt something like guilt when she used the word “youth.”

The issue was with my age.

“Doesn’t one’s youth only last through high school?”

“College students aren’t that different, though.”

Perhaps that was true once you reached Miyako-san’s age.

“If you can believe it, I still consider myself to be in my youth, too.”

“Well...um, you certainly are young.”

“That was supposed to be a joke...”

While we each gave each other something of a forced smile, a particular mood swept over me.

Even college students weren’t much different from high schoolers...

On further consideration, I supposed it was true.

I couldn’t find a clear distinction between my high school self and my college self.

Naturally, I happened to run into the confessor in question on

campus.

“H-Hey,” Edamoto-san gave me a flustered greeting.

“Good morning,” I responded, a little bewildered.

Did she always seem like that?

“Good morning...” she awkwardly bowed her head to me, which also seemed different from the Edamoto-san I knew.

We stood close to the main gate, exposed to the summer sun as the confusion intensified.

“Wait, this isn’t how things normally go. Um, how do I normally act again...?”

Edamoto-san frowned, tilting her head and scrunching her face in thought.

“We can just go on like usual... Oh, I guess the issue is what that’s supposed to look like.”

As her concern deepened, I too was starting to lose sight of what our relationship had been like in the past. Then, I remembered too late that she had confessed to me when we last met. I had told her I would think about it, and I really had done just that, but I hadn’t come up with a response yet. But regardless of all that, we had to go on with our college lives.

Still, as we walked together, there was definitely a slight awkwardness between us.

“Sayaka-senpai, did you get home all right the other day?”

“Yes, I didn’t have any particular issues.”

I was a bit full of it, to be honest. In truth, I couldn’t actually say whether it went all right or not, because I didn’t remember the process of getting there.

After I got on the train and sat down, my consciousness had faded in and out. The scene around me would suddenly light up or go dark. As the train car jostled, I felt like I was drifting up and down between dreams and reality. Maybe this was what it meant to blackout?

I had become a stereotypical college student—as I berated myself, I felt someone watching me.

When our eyes met, Edamoto-san’s face steadily changed color as

she looked up at me. It started from the middle of her cheeks, faint and warm.

A warmth different from the one of summer reached my eyes.

“What’s the matter?”

“The matter? I think I told you already. I blurted out the whole, entire matter.”

“Right.”

Hearing that directly, I felt like I was being dragged into the same state of mind as her.

“I was just thinking it’s pretty embarrassing to be in front of the person you like after you’ve laid your heart bare.”

“Right...”

That simple reason was probably related to why I hadn’t tried to meet with Touko much since graduating from high school. Although it was hard to face that fact head-on.

“Maybe it would be better if we don’t see each other until you have a response.”

“Right...”

I was so unsure how to reply that I kept repeating the same thing. But really, there wasn’t much else I could say.

Because I was still agonizing over it.

Agonizing over something wasn’t a no, at the very least. Even Miyako-san said so.

That’s right—I wasn’t saying no. I was just stopping to think and be cautious.

I already knew exactly what I was being cautious about. But that only made me want to take it even more seriously.

But in spite of my serious efforts, the answer wasn’t immediately making itself clear.

I thought I had learned a lot by now.

And yet, I had encountered so much affection since then, and now here I was.

Once again, I was turning things over in my hands, comparing

them, and thinking.

I wonder what love really is.

> *Will you be on campus tomorrow? <*

>> *Yeah. < <*

>> *Why do you ask? < <*

> *I have something to tell you. <*

> *Can we meet? <*

>> *I'd be happy to! < <*

>> *Oh, wait. Should I be happy, though? < <*

>> *Wait, wait, wait, is that what you wanted to talk about? < <*

>> *Aaaaahhh. < <*

> *Calm down. <*

> *But yes, I do want to talk about that. <*

>> *There's no way I can calm down, then. < <*

>> *Nope nope nope. < <*

> *If you can't, then... <*

> *I suppose let's call it off. <*

>> *Senpai, you're too quick to decide things. < <*

>> *But if you ask whether I'm usually calm... < <*

>> *like, probably not. < <*

> *Right. <*

> *Well, until tomorrow, then. <*

>> *Whaaat? < <*

>> *There's still six hours left in the day today.* <<

>> *Tomorrow is so far away...* <<

> *Please relax.* <

> *Our conversation isn't going to be that bad—I think.* <

The next day, I spotted Edamoto-san running over to me, pale-faced. If she wasn't moving as quickly as ever, I would have questioned whether she was physically okay. In fact, her perpetual level of energy was nothing if not reliable.

“Good afternoon.”

“It's not even noon yet.”

Her movements were stiff, as though she had gotten mixed up in potato starch. The hand perched on her elbow, which was bent at a right angle, fluttered like a flag. Before long, she seemed to lose the strength to do even that much and stiffly lowered her arm.

“Your face looks awful.”

“That's so mean.”

“...Your *complexion* looks awful.”

When I made that slight correction, Edamoto-san seemed relieved. Was she fine with that, then?

“It's probably just 'cause I haven't really slept much... I could have hidden it with makeup, but there isn't much of a point if I sweat it all off.”

Edamoto-san laughed, openly exhausted.

“I feel like I've told you many times already that you don't need to rush so much...”

“I don't mean to rush. When I try to keep up with my emotions, I naturally start running, that's all.”

She explained the reason she was running in her own special way. For me, this seemed like a dubious reason at best.

The last time I had spontaneously started running was probably all the way back in my childhood, when I was chasing after a cat.

Edamoto-san leapt to my side, as though she were pouncing on

something. A gentle breeze came to me along with her. As it did, I noticed something strange, and frowned automatically.

“...You smell like alcohol.”

“Huh?”

My underclassman averted her eyes awkwardly when I pointed this out.

“I was trying to calm myself down and, for some reason, there just so happened to be beer in my refrigerator.”

“I would think that’d actually make you feel even more of a mess.”

She must’ve had what you’d call a nightcap, I thought. Based on the color of her face, it didn’t look like it had been that effective.

“Besides, drinking too much isn’t exactly praiseworthy—you’re a minor. It’s not society’s rules that I’m worried about so much as your health.”

“Wait, I don’t drink *that* often, though.” Edamoto-san seemed flustered as she protested. If she did make it a habit, that would be a huge problem, especially at her age.

“And here I even made sure to tell you this wasn’t going to be a bad conversation.”

“But that just made it even harder to sleep...especially when you said it wasn’t *that* bad.”

Although Edamoto-san lamented, she didn’t show any sign of letting her lack of sleep drag her down—she was much faster than me, downright nimble, even. She circled around in front of me just like a dog.

“But I was definitely happy, too.”

What are you talking about? I asked with my eyes, and Edamoto-san gleefully laughed.

“Because this is the first time you’ve been the one to ask me to meet up,” Edamoto-san said, turning to face me and walking backwards.

Her voice pierced through to the back of my mind more sharply than the summer sunlight.

“Ahh...”

I really get that, I thought.

When it feels like you're the only one whose feelings are running ahead, you're bound to be anxious. You start to wonder how far you should really go and whether you're in too deep. So if the other person reciprocates in some way, that's enough to allow you to stop running and feel at ease.

When your heart gets too far, either from yourself or someone else, it becomes delicate and even weak.

And I am just as weak as anyone else.

"Well then, where are we going?"

Edamoto-san was already following me by the time she asked. Of course, I wasn't just going to head to lecture right away. We gradually broke away from the uniform flow of students.

"To the back of the lecture hall."

"Hm? The bench?"

"It'd be better if there weren't many people around, right?"

"Oh, umm...yeah, you're right. Plus I might end up crying again."

"Right..."

Tears come from the most extreme emotions, both good and bad. So Edamoto-san really might end up crying.

As we walked in silence, I thought back on Edamoto-san's tears from the first time we met.

"Sure is hot today."

"It really is."

That was the extent of our conversation on the way.

Soon, we arrived at the usual bench. ...Well, I suppose not the *usual* per se, but this was where Edamoto-san and I met, and where we seemed to keep returning to time and time again. Since it *was* the place where we met, I suppose I could call it our origin.

I straightened my back as I sat down and gazed out over the scenery before me.

The series of green spaces were different from the nature that had enclosed my surroundings in the past, and the glitter of heat indicated the season.

With Senpai, it had been the courtyard; with Touko, it had been the student council; and with Edamoto-san, it was the bench behind the lecture hall.

When the time came to leave yet another place that was both the beginning and the end...

I wondered whether, this time, I would finally leave without shedding a single tear.

“Before I give you my answer, can I ask a question?”

“S-Sure.”

Edamoto-san’s arms and back were completely straight. A small rivulet of sweat flowed along her arm.

It looked good against her tanned skin.

“Why did you fall in love with me?”

My voice sounded slightly cold, though it might have been because of the shade covering the bench.

I’m not sure how Edamoto-san took that, but the blush on her cheeks grew a bit.

“Are you doing that one thing? Like, testing whether I’m sincere or something?”

“I’m just curious, that’s all.”

I wanted to know Edamoto-san’s point of view about what it meant to care for someone. Edamoto-san scratched her head.

“It’s kind of hard to say, but...maybe it was love at first sight?”

“Love at first sight?”

I was already turning it over in my head. As though she were telling me to stop, Edamoto-san waved her hand side to side. “So I guess that means I initially fell in love with your face.”

“Mm-hmm.” Since I understood that, I agreed automatically and then felt a little bashful. *So it was this face*, I thought and brushed my cheek with my fingers. “I see.”

“Yeah, I guess so...” Edamoto-san’s voice didn’t sit right, as though she had lost her balance. Her tone indicated she was impatient to hear what came next.

I opened my eyes wide and looked at her intently.

“Well then, if I may...”

“Uh-huh...”

“To be honest, I can’t say that I’m exactly head over heels in love with you right now.”

I jumped right into it, assuming she had already figured out this much.

But then...

“Huh?” Edamoto-san looked genuinely taken aback.

“Wait, erm...did you really assume that I would be madly in love with you?”

When I pointed that out, Edamoto-san grew embarrassed and squirmed on the spot. “Well, I mean...obviously I wasn’t *that* confident... Oh, but if you’re not, that’s not good...”

Edamoto-san hemmed and hawed. ...The conversation was already completely off-track.

I was almost at a loss about what to do. Should I keep going and pretend this interruption had never happened?

Edamoto-san seemed like she was likely to keep mumbling to herself forever at this rate, so I couldn’t expect the situation to improve.

I tried waiting it out, but nothing changed as the cicadas cried. The clouds continued to swim, still unable to reach the towering sky.

“.....”

I decided to pretend it hadn’t happened.

“Something like this happened in the past, too, and I ended up actually falling for that person.”

Once I shifted back to the conversation abruptly, Edamoto-san stopped her squirming and came back to her senses.

“This was the person you were dating before, right? My exact opposite.”

I nodded a little.

“Back then, I didn’t know what it meant to love someone. But I wanted to know, so I thought I would try dating her. I had no idea where the future would lead, either. That might have been a disingenuous reason, but that was what started it. I think that this case

is very similar.”

Even though they were completely different people, the situations themselves were quite closely related. It was a curious thing.

Perhaps each person has their own particular path that leads to their heart, and so when different people follow it, they’ll inevitably encounter similarities.

“Um, so...in other words?”

I was sure there were no lies when it came to her love. I knew that, and I wanted to believe it.

But I still couldn’t forget how things had concluded back then.

I mean, in the end, there hadn’t been any lies in my love for Senpai, either.

I couldn’t help thinking about what would happen if I were to become the betrayer this time.

It was like grasping at air.

I didn’t get closer to her, but I couldn’t leave her.

I was at a standstill part of the way there.

“I wouldn’t call it dating yet, but let’s try being together.”

Once I finished saying that, the sound of the crying cicadas seemed to nestle up to the back of my ears and grow louder all at once.

Edamoto-san seemed frozen after hearing me, as though she didn’t understand at first.

Perhaps my brazen response left the possibility that this might even be a roundabout rejection.

“Only if that’s okay with you, of course,” I ended up adding on, like an excuse.

“So should I be happy about this?”

“I’ll leave that up to you.”

I will be the first to admit that I was being a bit annoying.

Edamoto-san slouched a bit and her forehead wrinkled, but as soon as she straightened herself, she smiled.

“I guess it’s kind of like a sample.”

“A sample?”

“Oh, or I guess you’d call it a trial period. Like, ‘if you’re enjoying our product, please subscribe,’ that sort of thing.”

“I’m sorry to give such an indecisive answer.”

When she explained things so positively, it made me feel apologetic.

“If you haven’t decided yet, then there’s a chance you’ll still pick me! So yeah...”

Edamoto-san gestured as though beckoning me over to her.

“You sure have a positive outlook on things...”

I wondered if I would be part of the “outlook” she sought.

...No, even if I weren’t part of it, Edamoto-san would turn around, find me, and make the place she had turned to her new outlook. Maybe being in love meant changing your course, at least a little bit.

“Well, cheers!”

It was difficult to even smile vaguely at her unfaltering voice.

“Hmm...yeah? Hm...”

“What’s wrong?”

Edamoto-san continued to speed along as she craned her head toward me. I was afraid she would hurt her neck from whipping it around so fast.

“Well, we’re walking together on campus, so...”

“Yes?”

“I was just wondering how this is any different from before.”

The day after I gave my response to Edamoto-san’s confession, our ordinary routine had continued on. Even our surroundings hadn’t changed. The college was bustling, the wind that breezed by was occasionally loud and unpleasantly warm, and the world seemed almost besieged by cicadas.

Edamoto-san and I existed within a section of that world. It was true—I couldn’t find a difference.

“There’s gotta be something, though. Otherwise, I feel like nothing’s changed.”

“.....”

For a moment, I recalled my time with Touko.

How I deliberately chose not to change anything and acted accordingly.

I considered who I had become: scared of change—cautious—a coward.

These days, I felt like I understood a bit of how Touko must have felt.

“Well then...”

When I tried to part ways with her, since we were going to different lectures, Edamoto-san raised her right hand and pointed in a random direction.

Automatically, my eyes followed.

“What is it?”

“Sayaka-senpai, I love you lots,” Edamoto-san declared with a big smile.

For a moment, a heat haze seemed to appear over the scenery, as though the sun were quivering behind my back.

This was quite a passionate goodbye.

“What makes you say that all of a sudden?”

“Just wanted to make sure.”

Sure of what? Before I could ask, Edamoto-san had already started walking.

“Lots, she says...” I echoed the word under my breath as I put my hand on my hip unconsciously and looked away.

Even though I wasn’t the one who said it, the amount of embarrassment I felt bubbling up within me was considerable.

“Looove yooou loooots!” she added loudly, waving her hand wildly from afar.

“Stop that.”

I muttered my response too quietly for her to hear.

While I hesitated over whether to wave back at her, Edamoto-san vanished before I could decide. How bold of her to just do whatever she

liked... Ah, but I guess what she liked was me, so perhaps I should say she was acting self-centered? But I was being self-centered, too—in fact, I was the only one being selfish here.

How could I ask her to stay by my side if I didn't love her in return?

What an awful thing to do to a underclassman, I must say.

I couldn't lead her on for too long just on a whim. No—I shouldn't lead her on, period.

Something like guilt ate away at me a little at a time whenever we were apart.

Did Edamoto-san resent me for behaving this way?

“Probably not...”

I could tell just by observing her attitude.

Normally, Edamoto-san would have just said goodbye earlier and left it at that.

But if she did that, it would be no different from before.

If nothing was going to change, she would change things herself.

I'm sure she was trying her hardest—to the point where she didn't have the capacity to think about my complex feelings.

She was a very good person, I thought.

But as basic as this problem might be, I didn't feel love for her from the bottom of my heart.

...But did that really mean it wouldn't work?

If we weren't completely enamored with each other, could we not date?

Was that the only shape love could take?

What does it mean to be completely enamored?

I did think Edamoto-san's affection for me was pure, if not exactly complete. She wasn't hiding behind frivolity, like Senpai had been. Surely, responding to that would feel nice.

We would be able to create a very comfortable relationship, I'm sure.

And yet, I kept scrutinizing her affection.

...So that I wouldn't make a mistake this time.

...For a moment, I had the fleeting thought that if it wasn't going to work out, it would be better not to try it in the first place.

But if that was how I really felt, then I would have turned her down right away.

I wanted to find a different answer, one that didn't seem like it was lurking down in a hole.

Not something dark but something bright.

I looked up at the sky, almost as though I were looking up from within the water.

Before I knew it, my eyes were blinded by the sunlight, and I shielded them with my hand.

The back of my eyes felt heavy after absorbing all that light at once. Until I became acclimated to it, the scenery seemed to spin.

Beyond the palm of my hand, the sun slipped under the cover of clouds, and the light gradually weakened.

Seeing the opportunity, I moved away my hand. The sun's radiance was weak enough to observe even with my naked eyes.

It wasn't as though there was some answer waiting for me beyond that blinding light.

I knew that no matter what conclusion I reached, the glitter of the sun wouldn't change.

The shape of the clouds and the blueness of the sky wouldn't change, either. They would continue to flow along just the same.

But my worries were still large enough to shake an entire world.

It was all an issue of my heart.

When I got home, I had the notion to call a friend of mine for the first time in a while.

It was something that I could talk to her about later if she didn't pick up, but the call immediately connected.

"Oh, it's Sayaka."

My high school friend's voice sounded like an entirely different

person over the phone.

“It’s been a while.”

“Who is that? Oh, sounds like Sayaka.”

I heard another voice on the line.

It was Manaka, who lived with Midori, joining in on the conversation as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Sayaka, you’re so mean. This is the third time now.”

“The third time?”

“That you called Midori but not me.”

“Erm...yes, I suppose so.”

I wondered why she would know the number of times I’d called and then realized it was because they were always together. In that case, it didn’t really matter which of them I called, since I could talk to both of them either way. But I supposed that was why Manaka was complaining that I still called Midori rather than her.

I hadn’t even realized I was doing that until she pointed it out.

In high school, when we entered our third year and changed classes, I wound up in the same class as Midori. Since we were separated from Manaka, I supposed I might have become closer to Midori. My priorities were such that I would automatically dial Midori when I called. Although, that might be based more on their personalities than anything.

The drastic differences that can come about from such minor reasons are one aspect of relationships that make them so curious and interesting, and requires careful attentiveness.

“Well, I thought we’d end up going off-topic if I called you, Manaka.”

“Yeah, fair enough.”

With that ready admission, the discussion was over. Manaka was quick to speak and quick to finish.

The only one who could keep up with her pace was probably Midori.

“So, I’d like to ask you for something that might be a little strange.”

“Something strange? Oh, this sounds good. I’d sure be interested in your strange side.”

“That’s true. We’ve only ever seen Sayaka being normal.”

I felt like they were taking this as an opportunity to drag me. What did it mean for me to be normal, though? It was easy enough to picture my abnormal self—I just had to think back to when I was drunk. Right now, that was a side of me that only Edamoto-san knew.

“All right, then, here comes the weird request.”

“I’m going to try my hardest to be weird, too.”

“You don’t even have to try to be weird.”

I lightly cleared my throat, though privately I agreed. Even though I trusted them, it was still a somewhat embarrassing thing to ask from friends. But it would be even worse to ask someone I wasn’t this close with.

What I wanted to know was the subtle difference that made.

“I want you to try telling me you love me.”

After I said it, I felt like it was sort of a very arrogant request.

Or maybe it just sounded like I was starved for affection.

“Although if you don’t love me, I wouldn’t want to force you.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Uh, um, should I say it?”

“Or me?”

“For now, let’s go with Midori.”

“Aw, I got rejected.”

I had no idea what Midori had done to the lamenting Manaka, but lighthearted shrieks reached me—*“Take that”* and *“Ahh!”*

Should I be concerned about that?

“Okay, I’m going to say it.”

Midori paused for a moment and mumbled, *“This is embarrassing.”* Then she spoke: *“I love you, Sayaka.”*

“Thank you...”

The appreciative love from my friend reached me and blew through me like a spring breeze.

It was fleeting and didn't dwell in my chest.

"Oh, you just cheated on me."

I almost burst out laughing at Manaka's response. And I couldn't hold it back when Midori replied to her.

"She asked me to say it, so it's not cheating, plus it wouldn't be cheating in the first place... Also, why are you even talking about cheating?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure you've never told me that you love me before, Midori."

"Uh, ah...I haven't?"

"I don't think so."

In a close relationship, sometimes people neglect to express those kinds of sentiments.

Even I couldn't recall the last time my family had exchanged the words *I love you* with each other.

Of course, it was a given that you loved them.

But maybe people ought to check in with each other's feelings more on a daily basis, just like how we examine facilities and equipment so they don't fail.

I knew you couldn't see the heart or emotions, yet I was still superficial about them.

Emotions were living things and circulated as certainly as the air.

Just as how, at some point, Touko had come to love Koito-san and had left my side.

"Oh, I know. Hey, Sayaka, try telling me you love me."

"Huh? Me?"

This time, Manaka was making that request of me. While I was stunned into silence, Midori jabbed, *"What are you doing, cheating right out in the open like that?"*

"Well, I just had the idea..."

"Maybe if you didn't blurt out every idea that pops into your head..."

"....."

So I was going to say it too, then. Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea.

“I love you, Manaka.”

Even though it was my own request that started it, I felt a little embarrassed doing this with my friends.

“Ooh, that’s nice.”

Manaka didn’t seem to be bashful at all—she was delighted.

“Midori, you say it, too.”

Manaka asked Midori for seconds like a kid begging for more candy, to which Midori replied in an exasperated voice, “*For some reason, I don’t want to.*”

“Huh? You don’t love me?”

“What? No, I do love you, but...”

Maybe Midori was acting annoyed as a way to hide her embarrassment.

“Wow, what should I do? You both confessed your love to me. Two-timing isn’t good, though.”

“Yeah, it really is no good.”

At this point, Midori was just going with it.

“You two can forget about me and live happily ever after together.”

“What? Et tu, Sayaka?”

“All right. I’ll accept your feelings, then, Midori.”

“Wooow, I’m sooo happy.”

I almost ended up sputtering with laughter at Midori’s deadpan voice.

Time seemed to turn back when I talked to them, making me recall our high school classroom.

“I’ve been rejected,” I muttered quietly. Of course, all I really felt was calm clarity.

It really is different, I became clearly aware.

It wasn’t like with Edamoto-san. If anything, I supposed it was Edamoto-san who was the special case.

My friends’ ideas showed me an answer in a way I never would have come up with. I felt like such opportunities came up often with

Manaka. Even if she didn't seem to be thinking at all—no, even if she really *wasn't* thinking—she still seemed to be able to see certain things clearly.

"Sorry, Sayaka. I love the cats at your house, too."

"Do you? I'll let them know later."

Though I might have been giving her too much credit.

"Oh, cats are great. Hey, Midori, I'd like to live with a cat."

"We're not allowed to have pets here."

"Not right now, but in a little while. After we finish college."

"You mean I'm going to be with you even after we graduate, Manaka? ... Will that happen? I wonder..."

"I'll be the one to decide on the cat's name. If I left it to you, I feel like you'd end up naming it after a military commander."

"If we're going to get a pet, I think I'd prefer a bird..."

"Whaaat? Why?"

"Well, because I like birds better. Plus, I've already got something close enough to a cat."

"But all birds have got are feathers."

"I don't understand what you mean about saying that's all they've got. I mean, all cats have got are tails."

"Um."

"No, they've got ears, too—you know, cat ears. Like this. And Midori, you know what, you're—"

"Can I hang up?"

"Just listen for a little longer."

Why?

In the end, I ended up silently listening to them talk for about twenty minutes after that.

It was noisy, unproductive, and not boring in the least.

"Senpai, I love you lots."

"You love saying 'I love you lots' a lot, don't you?"

Though these confessions of love were meant to be like surprise attacks, I had gotten slightly used to them.

“Huh? I never thought that you’d confess your love so passionately to me, Senpai.”

“You do know...”

“Kidding, kidding.”

That day, Edamoto-san had invited me over for lunch, so I went to her apartment.

The sound of the air conditioning working hard was rattling overhead, as though it had replaced the cicadas.

In actuality, I had planned to go to the library during my spare time, but I supposed there would be no point trying to read if Edamoto-san was with me. Most of all, when I was in this room, I stopped wanting to leave until time was up.

There wasn’t a single place on campus where I could relax this much.

“Just so you know, your confession already got through to me.”

Since she kept telling me she loved me, I thought that she might not realize I had understood that.

“No, that’s not the issue.” Edamoto-san shook her head. “I just feel like if you don’t make sure something is clear, it’ll start to fade. So, I just wanted to make sure my feelings are clear, to the point you can almost see them. I think that’s really hard to do, though.”

Edamoto-san spoke lightly while scooping *wakame* seaweed for the miso soup, not making it sound particularly difficult. But considering Edamoto-san’s clear voice, I felt like she probably could accomplish that.

It was as though her voice remained in my ears almost like stone... It had real substance.

“Well, it might not be working out too well, but I just couldn’t think of anything else.”

Edamoto-san laughed awkwardly and glossed over it.

“Is that why you say you love me *lots*? ”

“I couldn’t think of anything else,” she repeated again, as though

she were pushing against a hard wall. Even if she couldn't think of something, she took action anyway.

The resolution I lacked, Edamoto-san had in spades—to a dangerous degree.

She seemed to have a clear sense of what people around her liked and disliked, too.

“When I talk to you, I feel like there are so many things I should be learning from you, Edamoto-san.”

“Y-You think so?”

That kind of compliment made Edamoto-san bashful like a normal person. I felt like there were a lot of other things that she should have been embarrassed about, though.

“But if I keep learning from you, then even I might end up becoming more *like* you, Edamoto-san.”

“Oh, that wouldn’t be good.”

Edamoto-san acted like she was seriously concerned by my joke.

“I love you the way you are right now, Sayaka-senpai.”

When Edamoto-san declared her affections casually, it caught my interest somehow.

“What do you mean about loving me how I am right now?”

I couldn’t help reacting to how she spoke as though she knew something even I did not.

But she responded quite clearly to my abstract question.

“The Sayaka-senpai I see in front of my eyes is everything. I can’t explain it any other way.”

Her declaration brushed along my skin even more strongly than the breeze blowing from the air conditioner.

Edamoto-san continued, “I don’t care about a person’s dark side or what they’re really thinking anymore. I don’t understand all that, and I probably never will, but...what’s important is that you’re smiling right now and that you’re happy... *That’s* what matters to me. Sorry I can’t really find the right words for it. But I think that your thoughts always show up on your face. That’s why I love everything I can see of you right now, and that’s all I need to know.”

Edamoto-san's voice rang out along with the ceaseless breeze, appealing to me with her expression and gestures as well. She really never hesitated or worried about people's inner thoughts; she just bared her emotions and told me she loved me. No one could hear all that without feeling bashful, or without being deeply moved.

"You said you couldn't explain it, but you actually did a pretty decent job."

Edamoto-san grinned proudly, and I chuckled a little. Then...

"Sayaka-senpai, what do you see me as?"

She put down her chopsticks and asked me a question of her own. She peered into my eyes, as she did so requesting a response.

What was Edamoto Haru to me?

When I kept looking at her, what I could make out was still an outline. But I knew the significance of that shape. I lowered my hand, too, having stopped eating long ago.

"Could you try telling me you love me again?"

It seemed she hadn't been expecting my request. Edamoto-san froze momentarily, like someone had pressed pause on a remote. When she felt the sensation of her sweat and shuddered from it, she finally restarted.

"Haven't I been saying that pretty much every day?"

"You have, but I wanted to ask you to do it now."

Edamoto-san averted her eyes and screwed up her face.

"Sayaka-senpai, you really are a little weird after all."

"What do you mean, *after all?*"

Ignoring my question, Edamoto-san coughed to clear her throat.

As she stretched her arms and back, her voice seemed even clearer.

"I love you, Sayaka-senpai."

She might have been calmer since her confession ended up somewhat formal.

That confession of love came down on my entire self like a heat wave.

It went straight past the surface and burned, certainly, through my insides.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.” I nodded twice, as though I were scrutinizing it.

“Huh? What was that? What’re you nodding about?”

In order to evade Edamoto-san’s pursuit, I turned to face forward momentarily.

Even when I closed my eyes, something hot seeped in from beyond my eyelids.

I hadn’t fallen in love with her at first sight. I didn’t feel a jolt that day, like I did when I first saw Touko.

So it was so difficult to understand.

But even so...

Though I tried to resist for a bit, it seemed I had reached my limit now.

Even with my eyes closed, it was like I could still see something warm out there.

“Your love is different, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

When she said she loved me, it came through my ears and reached my chest in the same way as anyone else’s voice might, but...

Somewhere along the way, it turned into something different from a friend’s love.

Perhaps emotions can occasionally surpass science and common sense.

“You know, I think...”

There was a faint warmth—smoldering, like it was seeping out from underneath firewood.

There were faint signs of that in Edamoto-san’s tenderness.

In other words, if her love already felt special to me now, then...

“All I can anticipate is that I’m going to fall in love with you.”

If I came to love her, I would begin to change again.

I was frightened of embarking on that change, so drastic that it

would surprise even myself, but nevertheless...

“So if you don’t stay in love with me until I fall in love with you, that would be a problem.”

I had spent so long running after someone on a one-way road without ever getting anywhere.

It was about time that I put an end to such things.

So, I finally gave her a real response.

“Let’s date, Edamoto-san.”

That was my answer.

I tried to make an effort to say it gently, but it still seemed to be a massive shock to Edamoto-san.

She leapt up from her floor cushion and then awkwardly stopped partway through as though her head had hit an imaginary roof. Next, she staggered. She righted herself and came back down to me. But then, she immediately stood up again. Just as she had once said herself, she really didn’t know the meaning of calm.

But the way she kept moving regardless might be a good match for me.

“Really?”

“I hate it when people joke about such things or say it was just a game, so I would never say it myself.”

Even though I had recalled something unpleasant as an example, I think I was probably still smiling.

“R....r....reall...”

Edamoto-san began to emit some strange noises. Then she cleared her throat to divert away from that and immediately choked. Her constant changes were like a ball bouncing around the room.



As she tried to once again approach me, Edamoto-san voiced an, “Oh,” and wiped her forehead and neck with a handkerchief she had pulled out of her bag. Maybe she had thought it would be rude to come near me while sweaty. Was she trying to be considerate or something else?

She really was a strange girl.

“I’m not sure how to put this... Uh, this is really happening, right? Yeah, it has to be since you’re beautiful, Sayaka-senpai!”

“What kind of reasoning is that?”

What must my face have looked like in her dreams?

“I’m more worried about you,” I added. “Don’t you get bored of things easily?”

“Oh, about that.”

Edamoto-san looked into my eyes. Steadily, a warm hue spread across her face.

Then she offered me her outstretched hand.

“I’m going to find all kinds of new aspects of you every day, Sayaka-senpai. So I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“I see...”

What a very Edamoto-san answer. By now, I had gotten to know her well enough that I could confidently think such things.

Edamoto-san would reassure herself by looking for constant changes within me.

In turn, I would be assured by finding something in her that was unchanging... That was the feeling I had as I took her hand. As I grasped it, I looked at her face as though for the first time.

She was unlike anyone I had met until now. Her bearing was a far cry from any of the people I had previously fallen for. And, right now, I was trying to accept her.

Thus, that was how I came to date Edamoto Haru.

After that, it was my turn to have a sleepless night.

No matter how hard I tried or how many times I tossed and

turned, it yielded no results, so I gave up in the end. I pulled off the thin comforter and sat up.

It was like there was light in the back of my eyes and closing them was no use.

As I gazed at the wall in my pitch-black room, I remembered how I hadn't been able to sleep the day I started dating Yuzuki-senpai, either. Maybe idiosyncrasies like that just never got better.

Leaving the lights off, I absentmindedly passed the time. Though I felt fidgety, I didn't feel sick. I felt something through my fingertips like tension and excitement mixing together, as though something were about to start.

Since everyone else in the house, the cats included, was naturally asleep, my home was the very picture of tranquility. I couldn't even hear the cries of the insects beyond my window, as if they didn't want to disturb the quiet. Tonight, there weren't even many sounds from the rest of the neighborhood; it was quiet enough to even feel deserted.

Somehow, I felt I could almost see the stars beyond my closed curtains. Were those stars glittering from within me, or was I taking in their light?

What light source was currently shining on me?

“.....”

When Edamoto-san couldn't sleep, I wondered if she ever left her apartment for a casual nighttime stroll. I was a little jealous of that ability, a privilege reserved for those who lived alone.

...I wondered whether Touko also had times like those, living alone. How was my friend spending her nights?

I had used distance, busyness, and all kinds of excuses to not see Touko directly.

I wondered if the day would come when I would ask Touko for advice about Edamoto-san.

My thoughts kept multiplying, making it even harder to sleep.

In the end, I welcomed the morning after a mostly sleepless night.

A bit after I got out of my bed, which hadn't fulfilled its purpose, a feeling gradually and vaguely rose up in me.

“I have a girlfriend.”

I said it without thinking. Then, I walked around the room restlessly. It was light outside now. The town and people were on the move. I felt flustered by that and walked around and around as though trying to catch up to it. Of course, such a gesture was meaningless.

Edamoto Haru. The girl who was a year younger than me. Energetic, a little restless, with hair tied up in a little ponytail that looked cute when it wiggled...my underclassman. She constantly smiled at me, so when I thought of her, that radiant expression appeared before my eyes. Just as her name indicated, she seemed to be clad in sunlight.

This would be my second time dating someone.

I didn't have good memories from the first time...but perhaps it only seemed that way because I could only remember the unpleasant parts. That was the kind of person Senpai had been, but I *did* have feelings for her at the time, and I was sure that she had once made a smile come across my face and made my heart bound.

I couldn't say whether this new relationship would last long enough to call it forever, either. But even if our paths separated and we had to part ways, I wanted to have lots of good memories. That was my first thought.

"So, then...what should we do first?"

Inexperienced as I was, I couldn't immediately string together which steps should happen, or when. In the past, Senpai had beckoned me over and we had talked, occasionally over the phone, and that was about it. I had already done those things with Edamoto-san. Was that enough? What were college students supposed to do?

As I was moving around, I felt a gaze on me; when I looked into the hallway, the tortoiseshell cat was staring at me.

It was rare for both of us to be up so early.

"G-Good morning."

I became flustered as I wondered whether my cat had seen everything, and greeted it awkwardly. It left in silence without bothering to enter my room. I felt a sense of *déjà vu*.

Having finally been stopped by my cat's gaze, my own eyes went to my hair that had come undone and fallen across my shoulders.

I took my hair in my hand and watched it flow down between my

fingers.

My long hair made me feel a definite sense of time.

But I had gotten caught up in that slightly and let it get too long.

Putting it this way might be a little blunt, but...it was irrelevant now.

“All right.”

After deciding what I would do first, I stopped loitering and changed.

I left my room and washed my face. The water was somewhat lukewarm from the summer’s influence, but it got rid of the filminess that had formed over my face from my lack of sleep. Oddly enough, I wasn’t tired. I grew less and less concerned about my fatigue.

Having found an immediate goal, I started walking quickly like Edamoto-san.

I tried to start walking so I would be pulled into the cheerfulness, brilliance, and light.

But just as I went to pick out my shoes, I turned around and saw the gloom of the house’s hallway.

“Wait, I didn’t do it yet.”

I finally realized that once I had gotten all the way to the entryway, and scurried back.

Even then, my stride was quicker than usual.

After my second lecture ended, I asked Edamoto-san, “*Where are you now?*”

“*On campus*” was her vague response.

Her next text came a few seconds later. “*Let’s meet!*”

“That was the intent.”

After we decided the meeting spot in our replies, I put away my phone and faced forward.

I fixed the cord of my bag and took a step. My body moved as I consciously made an effort to go forward. Once I exited the lecture building, the strong light showered me with all it had, and I sped up

with my quickening breaths.

I was sure Edamoto-san would come running, so I decided to hurry, too. I wondered how long it had been since I had dashed off somewhere. As people get accustomed to living and learn how to better use their time, they run less often, I think. It's important to have spare time, but occasionally there are things you can only experience from trying to run—maybe.

Had I not met Edamoto-san, I likely wouldn't have run at college up through my graduation.

It seemed like dating her would make every day busier...which wasn't a bad thing.

I sprinted all the way there, but by the time I got to the front of the school cafeteria, Edamoto-san was already waiting. Just hurrying to the point that I was only lightly out of breath wouldn't be enough to catch up with her, then. When I stopped, the heat that had followed close behind me seemed to close the distance and envelop me all at once.

It was enough to make me slightly regret running all the way there.

Perhaps I should take the weather into account when mimicking Edamoto-san.

Edamoto-san jogged over to me nimbly and then leapt back in surprise.

“Ooooh!” she exclaimed dramatically. Then, she approached me and stretched out her neck as though peeking behind me. She was acting like a child who had found something curious to look at.

“I cut my hair.”

I had changed my hairstyle, too, forming a small ponytail on the right side of my head, which probably helped her to notice immediately.

This was the step that I had decided to take first. I had severed the hair I'd let grow since graduating from high school.

“Does this have to do with, you know—with us dating?”

“I wonder if it does... I just sort of did it.”

“You just sort of did it?” Edamoto-san repeated. “No one’s heart

has been broken yet, so it's not related, then—yeah.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Edamoto-san's easygoing way of thinking wasn't far from the truth.

I had finally cut off what had been dragging me back a little, even if I claimed it was fine.

“You said you loved me when I had different hair, and now it's suddenly short—what do you think?”

“Hmm, lemme see...”

Edamoto-san took three steps back and walked around me appraisingly.

“You're beautiful.” Edamoto-san beamed as she reported her findings. “I think I might've fallen in love with you even more.”

She came straight towards me and brushed her fingers through my hair.

“I kind of can't believe...um, that someone as beautiful as you would date me.”

Her eyes shone and at the same time wavered as if nervous about this concept. Her expressions were so nuanced.

“You're not trying to trick me, are you?”

“And what if I were?”

For example, what if someone only yearned for love and didn't care who it was with?

“Hmm...” Edamoto-san's eyes wandered as she showed she was considering it.

Then, she pulled her hand away from my hair and smiled as a line of sweat glittered on her skin. Her smile was jovial and determined.

“If you keep tricking me forever, then I might not mind.”

Though she hadn't said much, I felt interested in Edamoto-san's flexible attitude.

If I were to continue to trick her, I would need to be by her side for the whole time. *I see*, I thought.

I liked when things had a reason. Even if it was one as tenuous as

a connection.

“Like I said before, what I can see is everything to me.”

And it wasn’t as though tricking someone was always necessarily a bad thing.

Trying to show others a better version of yourself might even be a way of tricking each other with the other person’s feelings in mind.

I wasn’t so sure that Edamoto-san had thought it through that far, though.

“Did you sleep well yesterday?”

“I don’t remember much of what happened after you left, Sayaka-senpai, so yeah, probably.”

“Are you sure that’s really...”

I was one to talk considering the day I had gotten drunk, so I let the end of the sentence fade off.

“You look a little pale, though.”

“Yes, well, I couldn’t sleep much. I think I caught whatever you had, Edamoto-san.”

The cicadas’ cries reverberated in my sleep-deprived head without mercy. It felt like they were making my heavy head wobble, and I felt like I would end up groaning if I went off my guard. I wanted to avoid doing that in front of my underclassman.

“You can call me Haru.”

“You’re right.” When she inserted our usual exchange into the conversation, I agreed with her this time. “I suppose I’ll call you Haru from now on.”

I remembered that I had practiced with classmates in order to call Touko by her first name.

Compared to back then, this name came to my lips with ease.

But I still felt resistant somehow to calling Koito-san “Yuu.” I wondered what was so different, even though they were both underclassman.

Maybe there were just names that were easier to say.

As I contemplated all this, I noticed Edamoto-san’s astonishment.

“Whoa...”

Edamoto-san, or rather, Haru staggered as she backed away. She was always very busy with all this bouncing back and forth.

“What is it?”

“Well, I thought this was kind of a running gag, I guess, so I never thought the day you would actually call me that would come, and now here it is.”

As she talked, she came straight back to my side. She reminded me of how the toy balloons on rubber bands from temple festivals bounced back to one’s hand.

“Ummm... You can call me Edamoto-san, too...?”

“You’re quite confused, aren’t you?”

Haru. It was easy to say, and the word felt good to the tongue. Perhaps it was because it was a familiar word I already said in daily life —*haru*, like the word for spring.

“Haru is a good name.”

“It’s summer right now, though!” Haru’s face twisted into a smile and then she immediately covered it with her hands. “Sorry, that was a really bad joke.”

“It really was...”

I thought it would be hard to come up with anything worse. It was almost impressive that she’d peaked so easily.

“Um, well, right. Okay.”

“If you’re not sure what to say, then don’t say anything.”

Haru shook her head side to side reluctantly. Then, she hopped around again.

Putting aside her awful jokes, her actions were quite entertaining.

Watching Haru, who moved constantly even when expressing remorse, left little room for boredom.

“...I see.”

I realized the identity of the ambiguous premonition I’d had.

A cute girl who was funny, never boring, and who loved me very dearly.

Looking at it objectively, there were very few reasons why I wouldn't fall in love with her.

>> *Sayaka-senpai, do you have a favorite color? <<*

> *Why are you asking that out of the blue? <*
> *It's actually a pretty difficult question to answer. <*

>> *Well, I was thinking... <<*

>> *...that it would be nice to pick that color when I buy clothes and stuff. <<*

> *Wouldn't it be better if you just bought a color you like? <*

>> *Wouldn't it be even better <<*

>> *...if you like them too, though? <<*

> *I suppose, maybe. <*

> *But I still think that it would be best if you choose based on your own likes. <*

> *Because I want to fall in love with you as you are. <*

> *...Haru? <*

>> *Ohh... <<*

> *What? <*

>> *That just felt like a ball hitting me smack dab in the face. <<*

> *What is that like? <*

> *And to at least give you an answer, I like green. <*

>> Green, huh. <<

>> Spring is a pretty green, don't you think? <<

> Hmm, not yellow? <

> Or cherry-blossom pink. <

>> Oh, I like that pink. <<

>> We got it. <<

> Did we? <

>> Then do you have a favorite food? <<

>> I think I asked you before, but I feel like if I ask you now... <<

>> ...you'll actually answer me this time. <<

> A favorite food... <

> Hmm... <

> Soba noodles. <

>> Soba? <<

>> So it's soba... <<

>> Would you mind if the noodles weren't handmade? <<

> Make sure to practice. That was a joke. <

>> Well, if you come by today, I'll treat you to soba. <<

> I'm looking forward to it. <

> Also, to pay you back... <

> ...I'll treat you to something tomorrow. <

> Hey, Yuu. I know we made plans for tomorrow...but can I bring someone

along? <

>> Sure, Saeki-senpai. Who is it? Touko-senpai? Oh, I guess it wouldn't be her... <<

> How would that possibly make sense? <

>> I dunno...but when I'm staring off into space alone sometimes, I half-expect you and Touko-senpai to come by together. <<

> Right... I suppose that makes sense. <

>> Oh, is this a college friend? The one you talked about before? <<

> ...Kind of, yes. I'm not sure how to put this. She's not exactly a friend anymore. <

>> She's not a friend? Did you get in a fight? Wait, I guess you wouldn't bring someone you fought with... <<

> I guess it does still sort of feel like a friendship, too... <

>> I don't really get it. <<

> Um, to put it simply...I want to introduce you to my girlfriend. <

>> Ohh, I see. <<

>> Okay... <<

>> Wait, what? <<

“So this is your turf, Sayaka-senpai?”

“You make it sound like I rule over it or something...”

The area around the college was filled with an extensive number of things, but Haru was delightedly looking around at the—though I hate to say it—simple streets. Even though there was nothing terribly interesting about it, she was excited as if she were on a trip. According to her own words, it had been a while since she had even ridden on a train.

“You haven’t gone back to your parents’ house?”

“Not since coming to college. I talk to them over the phone, but it’s a pain when the house is so far away.”

Haru bounced up and down as she tried to traverse the crosswalk by stepping exclusively on the white lines. Was she a little kid? On top of that, when I widened my stride a bit to try and keep up with her usual quick pace, I ended up also stepping only on the white lines myself. Now I felt like I had regressed back to elementary school right along with her.

“Maybe I’ll try visiting during summer vacation, though.”

After we crossed, Haru turned around. Unlike me, it seemed she didn’t mind getting tanned, so her skin was thoroughly browned. The way that sunburned face turned to me, and how she walked ahead as if pulling me along, brought back a certain illusory scent from my memories. The smell of chlorine intermingled with simmering summer air.

“I think that would be good. Even if they don’t say it, your parents probably miss you.”

“I wonder if that’s true... But yeah, if you’re saying it, then it must be right.”

Haru seemed convinced. It was troubling that she put so much confidence in me, though.

I might end up pushing myself too far out of a desire to live up to that.

When I walked with Haru in my hometown, even I wound up with the curious feeling that I had come from another land. Haru, my present, was mixing with the neighborhood I had spent my past in... The outlines were blurred, as though I were looking at the scene from underwater.

I'd hoped that we could meet at Miyako-san's café, but unfortunately she was closed today.

So, instead of going out somewhere, we went to a friend's house.

"A bookstore?"

"This is where my friend lives."

Going past the front of the grocery store, I led her to an independent bookstore.

Looking up at its name, Haru wrinkled here nose.

"Uh-oh...I don't even really read comics, never mind books. I wonder if we'll be able to even hold a conversation."

"It's not like a bookseller *only* talks about books..."

Actually, I didn't have many memories of talking to Koito-san about books at all. If anything, we usually discussed the student council during our high school days. When we occasionally met up these days, talking about recent personal news served as sufficient conversation. Especially since I could ask about Touko and all. Hearing from Koito-san about how she was doing always led to fruitful discussions. Today, I had once again come prepared with a topic of discussion.

I lightly touched her shoulder as reassurance. Haru just tilted her head uncertainly.

It was rather new to me to not go through the bookstore but to go around it to the house in order to visit.

Koito-san came to greet us right away. Her eyes met with Haru next to me, and she said, "Welcome."

"I'm Edamoto Haru. Nice to meet you."

Koito-san responded with a smile to Haru's self-introduction.

Seeing her and the change in her hairstyle, I found myself thinking, *She's really grown up so much.*

Our ages only differed by a year, but I thought of her as if I were much older.

"This is the first time I've actually come into your house, isn't it?"

"Is it? Oh, right. I haven't been to your house before either, Saeki-senpai."

Koito-san led us to her room. Then she left to get tea, so Haru and I waited together.

As I looked around the room, my eyes paused on the small planetarium projector beside the bed. It looked rather expensive. I wondered whether it was a hobby of Koito-san's or a gift from Touko.

"That stuffed animal is pretty cute."

Haru pointed at the top of the shelves. There was a cute leopard stuffed animal there, and next to it was a...what?

"It's very, erm, round."

"Round and cute."

Haru was grinning, but I was wondering what in the world kind of creature this plush was supposed to be.

And yet, the round and squashed creature seemed to be to Haru's tastes.

"Hmm..."

I touched my own face. I didn't *think* it was round and squashed. At least, I hoped not.

For a number of reasons, I decided to pretend I hadn't seen it.

Touko had likely come to this room before; I wondered what she thought of it.

Perhaps she had actually been so tense that she wound up acting strangely on her first visit.

After Koito-san returned with the tea and sat down, Haru shot me a questioning glance that seemed to ask, *Am I allowed to say it?* I thought that action was a little cute.

But, right.

"I already told her."

"Oh."

Haru scratched her cheek as though it was a letdown. Then, after pausing for a bit, she looked at Koito-san.

"So you already knew, huh?!"

Koito-san's eyes grew wide, probably in surprise at how loudly Haru spoke. *That's just how she is*, I smiled and played it off.

“You’ve very energetic—just as described.”

“That’s a kind way to put it.”

If I were to say it without mincing words, Haru was sometimes quite noisy. But I could tell where her voice was coming from no matter where I was on campus, so it was easy to meet up with her. Haru’s voice was loud, but I also felt that it was easy to understand.

Perhaps that was because she spoke without hesitation. She was always moving forward, just like her words.

Although I might have been biased to think of those traits in such a positive, accepting way.

“I’m Sayaka-senpai’s girlfriend,” Haru said, straightening up for some reason. “Oh, and my name is Edamoto Haru.”

Her self-introduction had come out in the wrong order. Also, she had already told Koito-san her name when we first arrived.

After she finished, Haru looked at me with like a bashful smile on her face.

“Saying it is so embarrassing that it makes my ears feel hot, but it also kind of makes me happy.”

“My...ears feel hot, too.”

I ended up touching them to check. But the itchiness that had come about there was not unpleasant.

Perhaps this was the same feeling of happiness that Haru was describing?

As Haru and I gazed at each other, both of us continued to get fidgety and warm.

“Umm, would it be better if I weren’t here?”

“This is *your* room.”

“It sure is.”

Koito-san lowered her eyebrows and smiled slyly. Seeing that, Haru greeted her in a fluster, “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She pitched forward with momentum and became strangely formal.

“Likewise.”

Even Koito-san had been dragged along into the formality. Both of them were usually a lot more lighthearted.

Plus, we had already greeted each other earlier.

“So Edamoto-san—”

“You can call me Haru.”

As I listened from the sidelines, I wondered whether she told everyone that.

Koito-san started to respond with something but then paused partway through and turned to me.

“What do you call Haru, Saeki-senpai?”

I was a bit unsure what she was checking for but answered anyway. “Just Haru.”

Though I had only started calling her by that name recently.

“Let’s go with Haru-chan, then.”

I wondered for a bit what that *then* meant... Had she refrained from calling Haru by the same name I used? I didn’t have the impression that Koito-san added “-chan” to the end of people’s names often, so she likely was doing just that.

I wasn’t opposed to such meticulous thoughts and consideration, though.

“You can call me by my first name, too.”

“So Yuu-chan, right? We’re the same age, aren’t we?”

“I’m a college first-year student.”

As a response, Haru raised her index finger. Koito-san put hers up, too, but more reservedly than Haru had.

After that, we drank the tea she had prepared. Koito-san observed us closely as we did so. When our eyes met, Koito-san put down her cup and asked, “Which one of you was the first to confess?”

While I was stumped as to how to reply for a moment, Haru answered easily. “Oh, it was me.”

“I see,” Koito-san’s eyes went between Haru and me.

What is that look? As I was failing to gauge what it meant, Koito-san said to Haru, “Confessing is scary, isn’t it?”

Haru’s eyes went wide momentarily, but she immediately and deeply agreed, “Yeah, it is.”

Even though the two underclassmen had exchanged only a few sympathetic words, it seemed that they were understanding each other.

Though I had confessed my love once, I hadn't felt scared about it.
I might not have had the capacity to feel that.

Or perhaps being afraid that our relationship would crumble had become so routine that I was numb to it by then.

I felt that I had been in love with Touko for an overly drawn-out time.

That was probably how I was different from these two.

In particular, when it came to dealing with Touko, I couldn't even imagine Koito-san's distress.

After all, Touko was so stubborn and insistent on having her own way.

And so...

"You've worked quite hard all this time."

I respected her from the bottom of my heart. Thus, I coupled that sentiment with some simple words and delivered them to her.

"...Thanks."

Koito-san, who accepted that with an ambiguous smile, gave me a demure yet certain answer.

My kohai, whom I'd seen as a child, was all grown up.

Grown up enough to surpass me.

"Mrr." Haru's eyebrows twitched.

"What's wrong?"

When I tilted my head at her quizzically, Haru turned not to me but to Koito-san.

"Yuu-chan, do you meet with Sayaka-senpai often?"

When Haru asked that, Koito-san seemed to glance at me as she answered, "Pretty often, I guess."

"Yes, I suppose we meet up quite a bit. I don't have as many other people to meet with anymore."

"Mrrr..."

For some reason, Haru had a complex expression on her face. She pouted her lips and squinted.

“Since fewer of us stayed around after high school than I expected.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Even the underclassmen from the student council had scattered after graduating. All of them had chosen their own path, as well. Koito-san and I might be the only ones commuting from our parents’ homes.

Although, it seemed Koito-san frequently went to spend the night at Touko’s place.

“You’re going to spend the night there today, too, aren’t you?”

When I guessed right, Koito-san’s eyes darted around, which was a little entertaining.

“Like I said, how do you know?”

Where is it? Koito-san patted down her body as though trying to comprehend a puzzle.

Since the way she was flustered was so fun to watch, I decided I still wouldn’t tell until she figured it out herself.

“It’s a secret.”

As I went on smiling, I occasionally heard a “mrr...” that sounded like a groan from beside me.

“Sayaka-senpai, did anything ever happen between you and Yuu-chan?”

“Huh?”

After we had talked for a while and left Koito-san’s house, Haru expressed that suspicion.

Even so, I couldn’t think of anything that had happened—nor a single reason for her to suspect that.

“There’s nothing you need to be suspicious about.”

“Well, it just seemed like you were relaxed, or you were enjoying being with her, or something.”

“Being with friends is supposed to be enjoyable, though.”

I thought I had offered a very plain response, but Haru's eyebrows twisted as though she couldn't accept that.

"Koito-san isn't that kind of person," I insisted.

What I felt for her stopped at friendship and absolutely would not budge from there.

That way felt clear and comfortable, after all.

I knew love was a lot muddier, and for better or worse, difficult to see through.

"Then it's fine, I guess."

It didn't seem fine. Her tone was low and dissatisfied.

But this murky flow between Haru and I was just further proof that it was different.

"She's a friend—that's all."

"There isn't a difference between friendship and love. Since cherishing someone is everything," Haru plainly disagreed. "So when I think about my family or my friends, or even you, I consider all of you my cherished loved ones. I hate to put it this way, but I think of how I prioritize everyone, too."

Then, she checked for my response by peering into my eyes. This was no exam, and I wasn't Haru's teacher, either. And so, I thought that this was one possible answer, nothing more or less. There was no right or wrong.

"So that's how you think, then, Haru."

"Mm, I guess so. You don't?"

"Well, I don't dislike the idea of keeping things in order."

I gave the thing I was feeling a name and put it away on the shelf. That way, it would be easier to pull back out when I needed it. It might not keep things feeling fresh and new, but I thought it was the appropriate thing to do.

On the other hand, Haru was a person who entrusted herself to the torrent of unnamed emotions that came to her. Though our sense of values and thoughts didn't align at all...she was still here by my side right now.

"Hmm..."

“What are you thinking about?”

For once, she was walking so slowly that she might have even ended up behind me.

“How many family members do you live with?”

“Four. I live with my parents and grandparents.”

“All right, my target is fifth place!”

Haru held up her hand with her fingers widely outstretched and showed it to me.

“Fifth?”

“That’s my goal for the ranking of the people important to you.”

“Oh, so that’s what you mean... In that case, I also have two cats at home.”

“Cats, huh... So you’ve got cats...”

The fingers of her left hand slowly started to rise. She seemed to be hesitating over whether to put them down.

“My target is fifth place!”

It looked like she wasn’t going to compromise on that.

“Good luck.”

The cats were going to be tough to beat. I pictured the two cats, who had been with us so long that they were reaching old age, having a peaceful afternoon nap. That included the time I would run after them in elementary school.

“So in order to do that, first I’ll—I’ll...I’ll...”

“What are you going to do?” As Haru bobbed her head in sync with her distress, I teased her. Finally, she stuck her hand into her bag.

“Hey, want some candy?”

“You know what...” I rolled my eyes as Haru offered a strawberry candy to me. But, I took one anyway.

When I put the triangular pink hard candy into my mouth, my cheeks felt like they were puckering from the sweet-and-sour taste.

“I feel like trying to buy your favor one candy at a time is going to be pretty tough,” Haru said, popping a candy into her mouth as well. “Since I’m not sweet, after all. My fingers aren’t sweet to taste, and they

wouldn't bring you happiness."

"That almost sounds deep."

"Nah, I'm just saying whatever comes to mind."

While she rolled the candy in her mouth, Haru smiled.

"But, even if it's not as much as your family, if I'm not at least a little important to you...it'd just make me uneasy, you know?"

She sped up as she spoke her mind. It was like the small dissatisfaction of a child.

I listened to her and decided to deliberately treat it like a joke.

"If you're so worried, then why don't you just be important to me?"

"I'm working on it." As though trying to act confident, Haru responded with a smile. "Sayaka-senpai, make sure you hurry up and fall in love with me."

"I'm trying my hardest."

As we walked together, when I looked over and saw my underclassman by my side, I felt something like relief.

Just as hair could grow very long unnoticed, it seemed hearts could change without you realizing it.

"I feel like it's been forever since I last saw you, Sayaka-chan."

"Stop calling me Sayaka-*chan*."

That was my first response to my friend.

While drinking tea under a gigantic parasol, I followed the goings-on of college students with my eyes for no reason in particular. My friend was slumped on the table.

"The others have been saying they haven't seen you lately either, Sayaka."

"Have they?"

I had a thought as to why, but I lightly brushed it off. Of course it was because I was always meeting with Haru.

It seemed when it came to love, I was the type that leaned towards becoming neglectful of other things. As always, I was terribly

biased when it came to what I was interested in.

I wondered whether it was the same for others, like Koito-san or Touko.

“Did you get a boyfriend, too, Sayaka?”

“It’s not like that.”

I smiled and brushed it aside. It really was like that, though. I sipped my straw a bit then thought, *Hm?*

“What do you mean by ‘too’?”

“Since my other friends seem to be putting tons of effort into that.”

My crushed friend let out a few groans. I had noticed an increased number of lecture absences recently; apparently this was the reason. Maybe others weren’t that different from me after all.

I didn’t really care, but my friend who was facedown babbled like a cicada that had fallen from a tree.

“It’s like, y’know...”

“Ah.”

As I was offhandedly agreeing with my rambling friend, I saw Haru in the crowd. She was walking briskly through on her own, as though she were ignoring the flow. It looked like she was headed to the gate. As I followed her with my eyes, she seemed almost to notice my gaze, and turned toward us.

Haru’s face lit up, but once she glanced at my friend beside me, she lowered her head and started walking off.

“I feel like I’ve seen that underclassman before.”

“Right.”

There was another instance when I was with this friend and saw Haru walk away.

What was different this time was that I stared in the direction that she had left.

Our relationship...

I thought about it for a bit and then went on the move.

“I just realized I have to do something,” I lied and stood up from

my seat. Maybe that was too blunt?

But if I didn't hurry, I wouldn't be able to catch up with Haru.

"Oh, even Sayaka has abandoned me..." my friend lamented while pretending to cry.

"Sorry."

"I'm joooking. See ya."

She raised her unreliable hand and waved it like a flag as she watched me go.

My flippantly smiling friend was reasonable about it, but she didn't move at all in the end.

I left behind my friend, who remained immobile as though she had used up all her strength, and followed after Haru's back. Haru was quick, so I never would be able to close in on her by walking. *This is such a bother*, I laughed to myself as I started to run.

Of course, after running for a short while, I was soon within arm's reach of Haru as she quickly walked along.

I tapped her and then stopped by her side and lightly steadied my breathing.

I had to run, but having an outcome made me feel like I accomplished something, too.

After she looked up at me when I came by her side, Haru turned around to glance behind us.

"Are you sure it's okay?"

"I wouldn't have come if I wasn't."

I had done the thing that I had wanted to. That was all.

I regretted that back when I was dating Senpai, it had ended without me doing what I wanted even a single time.

Although perhaps I was just being stubborn and selfish.

When I was in junior high, and even during my time in high school, I think I had been a good girl.

I think that I had been bound by virtue until I was unable to move.

This time, if I didn't move, she might get away.

“Okay. Good.” Haru’s white teeth peeked out as though she were acknowledging me.

“It’s a little late to ask this now that I’ve already followed you, but where were you going? Did you have something you needed to do?”

If she were doing something, then there was a chance I would get in her way if I were to follow her.

“I was planning on going home to eat something, but...what do you think about coming along?”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

That was exactly where I wanted to go. We walked quickly, heading towards her apartment.

They say that time flies when you are with someone, but when it came to Haru and me, I felt like we would be able to make that time last a little bit longer.

“It looks like we’re making use of your tableware, Sayaka-senpai.”

Haru smiled happily as she prepared lunch after we got to the apartment.

“I think they’ve already more than made up for their cost.”

As I appraised the results of today’s meal, Haru accepted that with an agreeable smile.

While we rested after eating, I absentmindedly thought that I might eventually need to get a toothbrush to keep here, too. But if I did that, it would seem like we were living together. I hadn’t had a sleepover so far since coming to college, but even that might be a matter of time.

Would my family, other than my perceptive grandmother, comment on that change in me?

I wondered a bit whether Koito-san had explained Touko to her family.

Haru took a glance at me after she finished the dishes and broke out into a smile. Then, she walked over to me. As I inexplicably thought of my cats walking down my house’s hallway, Haru came around behind me. I partially turned around, wondering what she was doing, but Haru leaned on me from behind and clung to my back.

Since it was so sudden, for a moment, everything in front of my eyes seemed to nearly go blank. I suppose this is what people would call being flurried.

“Oh, sorry. Did I surprise you?”

When I heard her voice whisper from the side of my ear, I shivered.

I was about to bluff “*not at all*,” but when she was so close, I felt like she would figure out my lie, so I didn’t.

“I guess I’m just...not used to it.”

“Used to what?”

“Being clung to.”

Her breath that brushed my neck was ticklish. Then, as though to close the gap even further, Haru pushed her body closer to me. My shoulders twitched and I stiffened, but I could tell Haru was smiling.

“Listen, you...”

“This is a good bargain, if clinging to you is all it takes to see your cute side.”

When I glared sideways at my underclassman, who was getting carried away, she pulled her head back a bit.

“...Well, I’ll just think of you as a very large cat.”

If I didn’t think in that way, I knew my chest would tighten strangely and I would tense up.

The slight smell of sweat from Haru mixed together with her natural scent and reached me.

“Sayaka-senpai, you have cats at home, right? Two of them?”

“I do. Why, do you like cats?”

“I do, but I have to admit I like dogs better.”

I squinted my eyes when I told her my opinion, and Haru didn’t make any sign of changing hers to agree with me.

I wasn’t angry—I was just thinking back on the past.

I had read a type of novel I didn’t particularly like on Senpai’s suggestion and even lied that I enjoyed it.

As a result, I’d gotten her to smile, but had I been more honest...

...maybe I wouldn't have regretted it as much.

"Looks like we don't agree."

"I think that might be a good thing, though, yeah?"

"I think so, too."

If another person was going to cling to me like this, I wanted to feel differences between us. Haru put her arm around my neck and leaned in, then remained there unmoving. When I thought about it, it really was my first time touching someone so close. After all, Yuzuki-senpai hadn't been trying to get close to me, but to love itself.

But Haru was definitely seeking me.

At present, she was unusually silent, her gaze intently pressing in on me. She wasn't focusing on my face. When I tried searching for where she could be looking, it seemed to be lower than my shoulders. If I kept going and pinpointed it...

"So, Sayaka-senpai..." Haru started to say something. But then her eyes immediately shifted away. "Actually, amazingly enough, I realize this might not be a good thing to say."

"I won't get mad, so why don't you say it?"

In point of fact, I felt my curiosity bubbling as to how Haru might make me mad. At the very least, I thought she was more of a good girl than me. How would a girl like that provoke my anger? I waited, slightly excited about it.

"Okay then, here we go..."

"Yes?"

"You've got pretty big breasts."

"....."

I realized the meaning of Haru's gaze up to this point.

"Hey, you said you wouldn't get mad."

"I'm not mad."

I just didn't know how to respond. No one had ever said that so boldly to my face before.

Although it wasn't my face she was looking at. I averted my eyes.

"I don't mean it in a harass-y way. It's a totally normal

observation, really.”

“That’s an excuse a harasser would say.”

“It’s just, y’know, I don’t have much going on there myself, so I’m a little jealous.”

“I’m sure you’ll develop more, Edamoto-san.”

“You’re being so cold!”

I ended up automatically calling her Edamoto-san again.

“I guess we’re starting over as friends again, huh? That’s a downer.”

“That was obviously a joke.”

Probably. As we looked at each other from up close, we both broke into smiles.

It might have been part of my imagination, but I felt like Haru had moved away from my back slightly.

“You know, just being able to look up close like this makes me happy.”

“You mean at my chest?”

“Your face! Obviously I mean your face!”

When I said the thing that had come to mind based on the flow of conversation, Haru adamantly denied it. Her insistence was a little suspicious.

The silence continued for a little while.

“Oh, right. Senpai, let’s go to the pool.”

“...Aren’t you being a little obvious?”

Maybe she had invited me the last time as a result of being guided by her ulterior motives.

Haru gulped and froze for a moment. But she immediately switched gears and became serious.

“Okay, I’ll just come out and say it, then. I want to see you in a bathing suit.” Haru wiggled on top of my shoulders. “Is that so bad?”

“It’s not bad so much as...”

It put me in an awkward spot when she said something like that directly to me.

I remembered the day when the student council went to the pool. My eyes kept following Touko the whole time.

I couldn't judge Haru.

"Please, won't you show me?"

Now she was asking me that sincerely. Since her expression and attitude kept changing all over the place, I almost felt like I was going to burst out laughing.

"Soon, then."

"So now *someday* has turned into *soon*, huh?"

Haru chortled, but she wasn't discouraged at all.

"Would tomorrow work?"

"You really are bold, aren't you..."

I felt like she was going to wear me down.

It seemed Haru had enough power to chase my verbal promise of *someday*, overtake it, and make it come true. I felt almost as though she had retained the energy of a child even into adulthood, and was going to pull me along with her absorbed way of living. Though I didn't dislike that sensation, it was just that I had been there before.

"....."

I imagined the surface of a pool, rippling quietly.

A pool from some time in the past. The sight that I witnessed in the water.

I wondered what it was that I had discovered that day. Would I be able to face it as the person I was now?

...At any rate, that was how this wound up happening.

"When you said that we were going to the pool, I didn't think this was where you meant..."

It was the next day, Friday. I accompanied Haru, who had actually set up plans. But as it turned out, we weren't even leaving the college grounds.

"And it's just our college's pool."

"It's only during certain hours, but they open it up for public use."

C'mon, c'mon! Haru was giddy as she grabbed my hand. We were

both students here, but they still charged us a usage fee. They explained to us that we had a designated time of about two hours starting now and told us where the changing room was. The woman in charge of guiding us also seemed to be a student.

“It says people with hangovers can’t go in.”

“Why are you looking at me right now...?”

As Haru read the warning we passed by, a refreshing smile appeared on her face.

“I didn’t really have a lot of time to think about choosing one, so I don’t know if I want you to see me in my swimsuit...”

“It’s fine.”

“And how is it fine, exactly?”

“You have a great foundation to work with, so no matter what bathing suit you wear, it’ll enhance your look.”

When she readily doled out compliments without showing any sign of bashfulness, I felt overpowered.

“Haru, you’re very straightforward about complimenting people.”

“Well, if you do it in a roundabout way, you might not get through to them,” Haru responded blithely, as though it were only obvious.

Sometimes her honesty was dazzling.

I’ll leave out what transpired when we went to change in the locker room.

When Haru saw me in my bathing suit, she pulled away as though she were literally taken aback.

“Whooaa, ohhhh, ahhhh.”

“Oh, hush.”

I pushed Haru’s shoulders as she made a racket like a seal, and headed to the pool.

“This might be my first time seeing your bare feet, Sayaka-senpai.”

“My bare feet...?” Was that her way of trying to convey how moved she was?

“Stand over there for a sec.”

Haru had me stop and then went around behind me. Then, she thoroughly looked me over.

“This is kind of embarrassing.”

“Oh, man...I can’t even. Yeah.”

Haru seemed like she was probably satisfied.

“Sayaka-senpai, you’re so...” Haru stopped with her mouth still open. With a frozen smile still on her face, her voice slipped out in a monotone. “...pretty.”

“You just covered up that you were going to say something else, didn’t you?”

When I pressed her, Haru looked in any direction but mine.

“You’re so lewd,” I said.

“Did you just say something?” Still refusing to face forward, Haru started to lightly jog away.

“That’s dangerous.”

I followed her. We passed the disinfection mats, and the scent of chlorine and the sound of water greeted me. It was a long and narrow pool divided into six lanes. It resembled the swimming school I had gone to in my elementary school days so strongly that I felt like I had shrunk.

“Looks like no one’s around.”

Our demure footsteps echoed around the desolate pool. The surface of the water was unruffled, with only the faintest of rippling waves.

“Even though it’s technically open for use, there aren’t a lot of people who go out of their way to come.” Haru stretched at the poolside as she explained. “And students who do stuff on campus for fun are probably weirdos anyway.”

“Why are you saying that like you’re talking about someone other than yourself?”

Haru laughed and leapt into the pool. The dramatic splash and spray of water reached my feet.

It was true enough that I wasn’t too familiar with the feeling of

coming to school for fun. *I never even would have considered it in the past*, I thought as I went into the water after Haru. My knees bent immediately from the force and I sunk all the way to my head. I looked at the bottom and realized I had forgotten to put on my goggles.

Slowly, I listened to the sound of the water seeming to rush toward me as I floated up.

When I rose above the water's surface, Haru was swimming up to me.

"It's nice, like we've got the place reserved."

"It is..."

We were alone together in the pool. I had been in a situation like this before, too.

When I thought about it, that day might have been the start of it all. The long-ago feelings held in this water were like an anchor, securing my memories so I would never forget them.

"Want to race?" Haru proposed.

The thought of Haru's usual quick walking crossed my mind. "I feel like I'd lose, so I'll pass."

"What? C'mon, let's try!"

I smiled at Haru's childlike badgering, and we ended up going ahead with the competition. I dove underwater to pass beneath the divisions into the lane next to me. After I put on my goggles and fixed them in place, I looked at the neighboring lane and the tanned girl next to me.

I felt a strong sense of *déjà vu*. Back then, I'd lost.

"All right, we're going to start." Haru had her eyes trained on the large clock in the back as she said, "Ready, settt..."

Since I had taken out my contact lenses, even the hand of the clock looked hazy.

"Go!"

On hearing Haru's voice, I sunk into the water.

When I did that, and kicked off the wall and moved my arms, the sensation of that day came back to me even more clearly. It was as though the "swimming" entries were being replayed from within my

categorized memories. As the tips of my fingers remembered how to cut through the water, the faltering in my movements disappeared. *Like this, then like that...* As I accomplished those steps one at a time, I focused solely on progressing forward.

I'd thought I had mostly forgotten the lessons from my childhood.

But maybe the time I spent would never truly disappear.

I was engrossed in the feeling of swimming, as though the distinctions between my shoulders to the tips of my toes had disappeared and merged into one.

When my hand reached the wall, I took off my goggles and turned around. Haru was much farther behind than I had expected.

“So you’re not that quick at swimming, then.”

“I’m just a creature of the land.”

“So what are you saying *I am, hmm?*”

As we had that trivial exchange, I enjoyed the feel of the water as we played around.

Even though there wasn’t anything in particular to do, I was satisfied just making the water splash with Haru.

“.....”

Hmm.

“What’s wrong? Why are you spacing out?” Haru grew suspicious as I stopped near the center of the pool.

“I was just thinking how nothing is happening.”

“Well, that’s because only the two of us are here.”

“That’s not what I mean.” I laughed at her misunderstanding my comment, wiping away the water that trickled down my nose. When I was with Haru, the problems and discomfort I’d come to expect...never seemed to occur. *Here it comes, any moment now*—I kept preparing myself internally, but nothing happened at all.

This in itself seemed strange to me. The happiness and joy I felt around her were so steady that it made me uneasy instead. I’d never experienced love going well before. And yes, I knew that was a very depressing thought.

If things failed, I would of course be sad, but if things went well, I

was immersed in worry. What would it take to satisfy me?

“Huh? Sa-ya-ka-sen-pai...” Haru’s voice seemed to slur partway through as though it were immersed in bubbles.

I breathed out air as I sunk to the bottom of the pool. With the air leaving my body, the tips of my hands and feet started to feel heavy. My back touched the pool bottom and I extended my limbs.

My eyes, which I had left uncovered by goggles, captured the surrounding water unsteadily.

I could see the electric lights beyond the water’s surface. I stretched my hand to that light.

I tried to grab the glimmer that seemed deceptively close. My fingertips fluttered as they stirred up the water, but they touched nothing else.

Glug, glug. I heard a flowing sound near my ear. It was the sound of the air I was slowly losing. The bubbles rose to the surface of the water and disappeared into the light beyond that my hand would never reach.

The gravity I normally felt was softened in the depths of the water.

I felt it was a shame that I could only exist in this airless world for a fleeting time.

When I started to feel slightly out of air, I felt a separate flow coming towards me. I turned and saw that Haru had dove down. Her swim cap must have come off as she did so, since her hair was fanning out behind her. What a bad girl.

Perhaps she’d come down to check on me since I hadn’t resurfaced at all.

Once she joined me, I took Haru’s hand. The warmth of her palm seemed to ignore the temperature of the water. When I grabbed her hand, she let a large bubble of air out, but then she clasped my hand in return.

Haru’s tanned hand showed clearly in the water.

I pulled her hand, dragging her closer to me. Haru skillfully moved her legs and sunk to my depth. Once she did that, she seemed to ask me what I was doing with her eyes.

What was I doing?

What was I seeking at that time?

My oxygen-deprived brain was making my thoughts murkier.

Losing my inhibitions, my body moved naturally.

I brought my lips to Haru's defenseless neck.

Ignoring Haru's surprised movements, I pressed them on her skin.

Though my position was reversed compared to back then, my heart leapt powerfully.

Bubbles escaped from between my wavering head, my shifted lips, and Haru's skin.

Haru inhaled those bubbles as though she were biting at them.

What had left me had gone into Haru.

Thump, thump. A flowing sound like a beat became louder. Even though we were in the water, it was like it was directly in my ears.

Shifting, Haru moved to my neck instead.

Do you understand what this means? I smiled as I accepted her lips.

Haru's little remaining air rose and engulfed me.

In a daze, I only felt the sensation of Haru's lips. I forgot breathing, gravity, and so many things, as only the sound of Haru's heartbeat remained in the water. Just like that, it felt as though the cracks that had continued to remain in my newly freed heart were being filled.

At that point, I was at my limit. With no more air to breathe out, we moved our limbs sluggishly, as though they were being weighed down by something, as we headed to the surface. We didn't rise up alone—we returned together.

We burst into the light.

Once we broke the water's surface, the scene spread before us, just the same as it had been before we had sunk down.

I returned with Haru to the normal world.

We looked at each other with our hands still clasped together. Haru's uncapped hair was wet and lustrous.

The two of us heaved in large gulps of air.

I felt the blood running through my trembling fingertips.

Sound became more distinct; the water cutting through the desolate pool echoed lazily.

“I dunno why, but...” Haru prefaced herself and lifted our hands.
“Our palms are pretty warm, aren’t they?”

Yes, Haru was warm. It wasn’t a heat that would scald me, nor harsh enough to wound my heart. It was a temperature that I could stay in. A warmth that made me want to be there.

I didn’t feel the need to run away anymore.



Because the time was right now, I recalled the scene I had once found in the water through my blurred vision. That powerful pain I felt at the time, as if cracks were forming in my heart. The chilling premonition that seemed to enter through those gaps.

That was the first time I experienced such pain.

Since then, I had come to understand the sensations that accompanied love, and now that I knew it existed in the world...

I had felt many kinds of pain throughout the years.

By chipping away bit by bit at my past pain and failures, and patching myself back together, I had come to be who I was now.

And I was incredibly relieved that I had found peace before I allowed my entire self to be rearranged by pain.

Maybe that was what you'd call happiness.

>>*So, a cultural festival play, huh?*<<

>>*Was it fun?*<<

>*Yes.*<

>*Though I imagine you wouldn't like that sort of thing, Haru.*<

>>*Don't judge a book by its cover.*<<

>>*Although yeah, I probably wouldn't.*<<

>>*But I feel like if I went to one, I might actually enjoy it.*<<

>*Then let's go see one sometime.*<

>*Come to think of it...*<

>*I'm going to meet up with someone soon.*<

>*At least, I'm going to try.*<

>>*Soon? Someone? Who would that be?*<<

>*My crush from my high school days.*<

>*I was thinking I should at least tell you.*<

>It was just a thought.<

>> You sure are honest, Sayaka-senpai. <<

>I just don't want to keep anything in the dark between us.<

>Plus I think you look better in the light.<

>That's how I want to see you.<

>> Whoa. <<

>> Oh crap. <<

>Oh crap?<

>> I liked that a lot. <<

> You like crap?<

>> The thing you said before! <<

>It was a joke.<

>I was just a little embarrassed.<

>> Say it again. <<

>Just scroll up and look.<

>> Aww. <<

>> Okay. <<

>> That's fine, of course. <<

>> Have a good time. <<

>Thank you.<

>>*Don't cheat, though.*<<

>*I could never.*<

“I couldn’t.”

I would never be able to reach the star that was Touko.

>*Want to meet up soon?*<

>*Not to do anything in particular.*<

>*I just sort of want to see your face a little.*<

>>*We just saw each other a little while ago, though.*<<

>>*But that sounds good.*<<

>>*Now that you mention it, I feel the same way.*<<

>>*I'm looking forward to it.*<<

>*I'm looking forward to it, too...<*

>Touko.<

“Have we come here just the two of us before?” Touko asked as we sat at a table in the back of the café.

“Just once.”

I suppose Touko didn’t remember the two of us had come here during the summer break.

After Touko froze for a bit, she put on a soft, sociable smile.

It could even be called deceptive.

“That’s our Sayaka.”

“What’s that supposed to mean...?”

I ended up laughing at the carefree praise.

“We used to come here a lot with everyone from the student council, so maybe that part’s just fuzzy.”

I put my things down next to me as I vaguely recalled those times.

In those days, we had all gathered here and put our heads together to discuss the student council play.

No matter how far I went in the future, I was sure those would still be unforgettable and precious times.

After we gave our order to the store employee, I looked at Touko across from me.

Nanami Touko. I didn't see any major external changes in her since graduation.

Because she was so beautiful, one could describe her as perfect, maybe there was no need for her to change her outward appearance.

But there was a subtle difference in her behavior.

Right now, the Nanami Touko in front of me wasn't acting the role of anyone else.

"We saw each other at the culture festival, but it still feels like it's been a long time."

Touko celebrated our reunion with a merry tone. "Yes, it really has been some time. I'm sure."

But my response fled from honesty a bit.

"It doesn't feel like such a long time for me, though. I've heard quite a bit about you from Koito-san. I see her a lot."

"Oh, you do?"

The reaction from Touko wasn't what I expected.

"She hasn't mentioned that to you?"

"I haven't heard much about it."

Touko leaned forward and brought her face close. Then, she had a complex expression on her face.

"...Is she cheating?"

I wondered why everyone suspected me of cheating. Did I just have the kind of face that looked like I would?

Well, putting that aside.

I couldn't tell whether Touko was saying that as a joke or if she really meant it.

Ahh, I felt like a wind was eddying in my heart as I ended up smiling. Touko really is happy right now, I thought.

“Who knows?”

When I jokingly sidestepped it, Touko pouted for a moment. But she immediately corrected herself, speaking quickly.

“No, that was a joke. That was just a joke, okay?”

“Right.”

When I couldn’t keep my shoulders from shaking with mirth, Touko looked to the side awkwardly.

The occasional childish gestures that she showed me...always stole my attention.

“In fact, I was just at Koito-san’s house. Oh, to buy a book, of course.”

I raised the shopping bag I had put down with my other things. Touko’s mood immediately improved, and she peered at the bag with interest.

“What did you buy?”

“It’s Kano-san’s book.”

Opening the bag, I showed her the cover of the book. I wondered how long it had been since I had bought a novel.

“Oh, you bought a copy, too, Sayaka?”

“Of course. It’s the debut novel of someone I know, after all. I wanted to congratulate her, too.”

Kano-san was going to the same college as Touko. It seemed she had a lot of opportunities to see Touko and Koito-san.

“Well, I had her autograph mine directly.”

“What are you getting competitive for?”

As I laughed at Touko for being proud of herself, she averted her eyes with an, “Oh...” as if remembering something.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, when I had her sign it, she signed it so smoothly that I asked her whether she practiced doing it, and she got so embarrassed... Maybe it was kind of a mistake to ask that.”

“Perhaps you should practice your autographs, too, Touko?”

“Who would I even do one for?”

“Well, if you really become a big-time actress, you might have plenty of opportunities.”

When I touched on something Koito-san had told me about in the past, Touko smiled ambiguously.

“I’m...still not sure about that.”

“Right. I really think you should talk to Koito-san and make a decision.”

“Yeah.”

As Touko nodded meekly, I closed my eyes and smiled slightly.

If only she had listened to people’s advice so obediently in the past.

I reminisced on the days when I was the one to fold at Touko’s stubbornness, running around at her every whim.

It felt a little good to be belatedly annoyed about that.

Our drinks soon arrived. Looking past the employee, I met eyes with Miyako-san, who looked busy. She waved her hand at me slightly. Touko and I bowed back to her.

We both sipped our coffee, and Touko said, “Come to think of it—well, I suppose that’s an odd phrase to start this out with, but...you have a girlfriend now, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I replied simply as she gave me something like puppy-dog eyes.

“But I only found out recently.” Touko seemed reproachful as she narrowed her eyes and glowered at me.

“I thought Koito-san would tell you for me.”

“You could have just told me directly.”

“Well...it didn’t really come up.”

It would be odd to report to her I had gotten a girlfriend without her even asking, I think.

If I did that, it would seem like I was boasting about my love life.

...Though surely I wouldn’t do that.

“What’s she like?”

“You haven’t heard about her from Koito-san?”

“I heard a little,” Touko said. “But I wanted to hear it from you.”

It kind of felt like a conversation I’d had before.

I trained my ears on the bustle inside the café as I spoke about Haru. “She’s energetic—very much so.”

When I introduced my girlfriend to anyone, that was always where I started. Maybe that was the strongest impression I had of her. Beyond that, Haru was very lighthearted. She always was running as though she didn’t know how to stop.

Just as she herself claimed, maybe her body naturally rushed around trying to keep up with her rapidly-changing emotions.

Accompanying her, I lived my days with a speed I hadn’t known about until now...and that was a good thing.

“Since I fell for her, I thought I’d like to meet with you.”

There was something I had gained from her that even allowed me to look straight into Touko’s eyes.

Touko looked back at me as I did that and smiled.

“I’m sure she’s a lovely girl.”

Very, I answered only in my mind.

“She’s also very good at cooking.”

“Oh, I’m jealous,” Touko complained. She had started to lean forward; then, as though suddenly realizing that, she drew back and cleared her throat. “I keep telling myself I should work on cooking for myself every day, too.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“This is a secret, but I’ve been getting excited and making something whenever Yuu comes over, so now she thinks I cook all the time.”

“All right, I won’t tell.” I imagined Koito-san would be able to guess that much just by looking into the fridge, though. “How do you like living alone?”

“I’ve gotten used to it, but to be honest, it’s pretty hard.”

It was new to me for Touko to acknowledge a difficulty so easily.

“There are a lot more things I can’t do than I thought, but trying my hand at them has been a lot of fun.”

“.....”

Maybe this was what Touko’s actual face was like—the one that I hadn’t been able to get to know.

I silently listened to the true Touko’s words.

“It was the same with the play, but there were a lot of things I still didn’t know...a world I didn’t know about. In the past, I used to be scared of making contact with things like that and changing. But then...”

I felt Touko’s heart falter and move greatly.

The shimmer that filled her eyes said everything.

“Yuu told me that no matter what I do, no matter how much I change, it’ll be okay.”

“Did she...”

I wondered whether I could have told Touko that or not.

That was likely proof of the difference between Koito-san and I—her courage.

I’m just no match for her. I let that complaint ride on the steam rising from the coffee, up to the ceiling.

After that, I had less to say and slowly enjoyed my coffee.

The significance of meeting with Touko was now more than fulfilled.

I listened to Touko’s voice and confirmed she was happy.

That was enough to satisfy me.

“There really isn’t much to formally talk about, is there?”

After all, up until now, I had spent plenty of time with Touko, our voices blending together.

“You’re right. But I’m glad we met.”

“I think the same, Touko.”

It was likely that we would become more distant from here on.

Since we had stopped running in parallel lines to each other, we would probably keep getting farther away from each other as time piled up.

So before the opportunities for us to meet became rarer, I wanted to enjoy myself as much as I could in the moment.

“Hey, Touko.”

“Hm?”

“How about we have whoever loses pay?”

As I proposed that, I held out my loosely clenched fist.

I wasn’t troubled about anything, and I didn’t have any ulterior motives.

I just wanted to try it out.

At first, Touko’s eyes went round. But then, slowly, loosely, she smiled.

“Sounds good.” Touko murmured as though she were chewing it over. “Yes, that’s lovely.”

I’m sure I felt the same way.

“Rock...”

“Paper...”

The hand she put out was exactly what I had expected.

And so, I was able to easily choose whether I wanted to win or lose.

The Stars Waver

WHEN YOU FALL IN LOVE with someone, it's as though you are reaching towards a star. I pretended I hadn't noticed that I never seemed to reach it, no matter how much I reached my hand towards it.

Because there was something incredibly beautiful in the direction I reached towards.

It was just that I couldn't reach it.

Stars are incredibly distant things.

Without jumping clear over everything to reach a place high up, you would never be able to touch one.

And if you did reach one, the star would lose its light and simply settle into the commonplace within your hands.

Regardless of that...

Wishing to touch them, even though they would lose their radiance upon approaching them...

...there was a girl who reached for the stars.

Seeing her, I finally decided to move as well.

I was far too late, it was reckless, and I didn't reach the star in the end, but it allowed me to progress forward.

And so, eventually, I was able to find another star.

I wanted to touch that star, this time for sure.

Yes, it's true...

This time, I finally took the leap.

"I've been thinking this for a while, but you really don't need to add 'senpai' to my name."

After leaving Haru's apartment and walking halfway down the stairs, I said something I'd been thinking about for a while.

Haru, who was following a step behind me to see me off, replied along with her light footsteps. "But you *are* my senpai."

“You can call me Sayaka.” I turned around and mimicked a certain someone, who pushed out her bottom lip, which made my shoulders quiver slightly.

“It’s dangerous if you don’t watch your step as you go down the stairs...”

“Okay, okay.”

Though it was much more dangerous for Haru, considering she regularly ran everywhere.

Each time I went down a step, the winter air bit at my ears. The temperature that continued to sink with the coming of night gave rise to a smarting, burning pain as it touched my skin. Though I had met Haru just as the heat and season had bordered on summer, the flow of time had gone by before I knew it. Even as we continually looked away and made detours, time silently and perseveringly marched on, without either accelerating or stagnating.

“S-Sayaka?”

“Yes.”

I realized Haru’s voice was getting away from her and couldn’t help but laugh. When I finished going down the stairs and turned around, Haru’s face looked uneasy, as though it didn’t feel right. Her eyes escaped to the right, and her mouth and nose were turned down.

“No, I don’t think I can...” Haru turned away as she mumbled. “I just feel a ton of resistance about calling someone older than me by their first name.”

“You’re a good girl, aren’t you?”

When I teased her and patted her head, Haru turned around and retreated to dodge me.

After she took a little distance from me, she looked at me from head to toe.

“What?”

“You’re beautiful!”

Haru gave me a thumbs up. *She’s doing it again.* My embarrassment intermingled with a smile.

“Thank you.”

“Sometimes I just can’t believe someone as beautiful as you loves me.”

I felt like we had had this conversation before.

Haru, who had come closer to me, patted my shoulders and elbows as if checking them. It was as though the moment we separated, she doubted my existence, even though we had been thoroughly sticking close to each other until just earlier. Her eyes reflected me flatly, like the surface of water.

“Do you really?”

“Really.”

I brushed aside her bangs slightly and touched her forehead. Haru was warm.

Warm to the point I almost felt like it was wasteful of my chilled palm to steal that heat.

“I’m happy when you say you love me. When you praise me for being beautiful, my heart pounds. So yes, I love you.”

“I love you, too!” her answer overlapped with mine.

Haru accepted my statement and seemed satisfied; she touched my hair, which was now at my back, and stroked it softly.

For a while, we stayed like that in front of the apartment front with its small amount of illumination.

Eventually, after Haru took a step back, she mumbled again, “Using your first name, huh... Maybe I’ll ask Yuu-chan for pointers.”

“Koito-san? Do you talk to her a lot?”

“Every once in a while. I ask her about you and get her advice.”

She grinned. Thinking that she might be asking about my high school days, I ended up turning sullen.

“I can’t say I approve of gossiping about people behind their backs.”

“I don’t think you’d tell me anything if I asked you, though.”

“What did you even ask her...?”

Maybe I ought to have a small talk with Koito-san to tell her not to share anything embarrassing.

But then she was likely to ask me, *like what?*, and I would end up being put into a tough spot instead.

“Since Yuu-chan said that she uses her girlfriend’s first name.”

“Huh...”

I didn’t know that. I wondered if, when they were alone together with hands entwined, they put aside all distance and called each other by their first names.

“.....”

I didn’t know.

In my high school days, I had thought there wasn’t anything about Touko I didn’t know.

Maybe the things I didn’t know about Touko and Koito-san would start to accumulate faster and faster from now on.

But that was a natural part of meeting and parting with people. I had left Touko’s side, and the current me was setting out into the night. Many bright things awaited me beyond the thin, elongated clouds of evening.

“You don’t have to walk me out any farther than this.” Since she seemed likely to tag along with me all the way to the station if I didn’t say anything, I let her know in advance. When I said that, Haru’s right foot stopped momentarily in midair. Her white breath billowed out as she stayed frozen.

Haru, a college student who didn’t go home to her parents’ house even on our incredibly long spring breaks, had told me “*I want to see you,*” so I ended up getting on a train even though I had no business on campus. When I was going home, even though it wasn’t yet late at night, the darkness seemed deep enough that I could dip my palms into it like a ladle.

“You don’t like the cold, right?” I said.

Haru put on a joking grin. “Since my name is Haru.”

“Ah yes, of course.”

When we played with her name—pronounced the same as the word for spring—I smiled slightly. It was cold outside right now, so it would be best if I started walking and Haru went back to her room.

Even though I knew that, I just couldn’t bring myself to move.

That was how our partings always were.

It was a little bit like when we tried to hang up on the phone.

“Yuu-chan is a good girl.” Haru kept talking, as though she too was reluctant to part.

“Hmm? Yes, she is.”

“Plus, when I told her to call me Haru, she called me Haru-chan right away.”

“Right...I didn’t call you that right away, so I’m a bad girl, aren’t I?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess that’s true.” Haru grinned, looking highly amused. “But I like bad upperclassmen, too.”

I was sure she said that nonchalantly, but it made my heart feel lighter.

“That’s good to know...”

How reassuring it was to be given permission.

To meet someone, come into contact with someone, and be influenced by them.

It was impossible to live that way without changing.

Haru, who had come all the way out to the sidewalk, looked up at the sky as she grumbled, “I wonder if spring will come in the morning.”

“The sun is starting to set later, so it’ll be soon.”

While breathing in the freezing air of March, I stood next to Haru. She definitely was smaller than me.

I secretly thought that her height would eventually catch up with me, but it didn’t seem that would be the case after all.

“I was crying when I met you in spring, wasn’t I?” Haru looked up at me.

“Yes, I suppose that did happen,” I replied as though I had forgotten about it.

In actuality, I remembered that day without having to retrieve it from memory.

There was still far, far more distance to go until I could look up at the sky and reminisce on that.

I thought that it would be good if it continued to be far, far away.

“I hope that I don’t cry this spring.”

Of course, I started to say and then swerved into some slight teasing. “A bad upperclassman just might make you cry.”

“Ahaha, in what way?” Haru asked, not acting serious at all.

“Huh? Umm...”

I was at a loss when she asked for a specific way I would do it. I might not have ever made anyone cry before up until this point. Though others had made me cry quite a bit. *That’s pretty terrible...* I felt objective pity for myself.

“So what is it? How are you going to make me cry?”

“I-I’ll slap you.”

“I can’t believe you’d resort to violence against me!” Haru sounded shocked. Caught up in the moment, I raised my arm.

“Like this?”

“Looks like you’re getting cold feet, Sayaka-senpai.”

She didn’t point at my raised arm but instead down at my feet. I cleared my throat as I put my hand down.

“Well, I haven’t hit anyone before.”

“You really are a good girl, Senpai.”

“I’m not a good girl or anything... I’m sure I was just holding back.”

I looked down at my right hand. I’d been through plenty of aggravating experiences, of course.

There were even times when I got angry and my fingertips firmly curled up.

But I had thought that was a bad thing and held back.

When I thought about it, I realized there were a lot of times like that for me. I’m not sure if I had a knack for it or if it was in my nature, but even though I had held back for a lot of it, I still managed to bear through it. Maybe I was resilient when it came to pain, though it wasn’t as though I didn’t feel it.

“Then you don’t have to hold back with me. If you want to hit me,

you can.”

Haru took my right hand and put it against her cheek. Her cheek was already cold.

“Whoa, your hand is cold, Senpai.”

You too, I conveyed to her with the faint movements of my fingertips. Then, we looked at each other, and I suddenly lowered my shoulders.

“But I’m not here because I’m holding something back.”

“Me either.”

Our chilliness and the slow itchiness that was coming about and the warmth...

Those all seemed to make small lights twinkle in the back of my head.

But...

“...Much...”

Much? I wished she wouldn’t say things that would ruin me.

My heart complained happily.

“Of course, I’m working hard so that won’t happen. I realized that was important after I was dumped.”

At Haru’s bashful voice, my earlobes felt ticklish.

It was the same answer I once found in one of my own past failures.

“Me too.” When I muttered that quietly, almost as though it were just grazing my back teeth, I wondered whether it reached Haru’s ears in the end.

A thin flow of air streamed out from Haru’s smile.

It was her sigh, whose temperature I knew.

When I was conscious of it, I wanted to feel it closer.

When I stooped slightly to bring my face closer, Haru immediately responded by stretching herself up slightly. As though a string were entangling us, our faces came closer together, and then met. No matter how many times we did it, the feeling of my breath being stopped by her lips made me feel almost as though I had landed somewhere... It

gave me an odd sense of arrival and relief.



Though it was the middle of the night, we were still in front of her apartment, so we couldn't keep doing this for long.

Only the sensation of Haru's lips continued to remain.

Whether we touched in the winter or under the night...

"You're warm."

When I let that impression slip, Haru, cherry-blossom hued, touched her own lips as though to check.

After that, I finally left Haru and walked alone into the night.

The warmth I had gotten was deprived from me bit by bit, as though it were chasing after the breaths that stretched out behind me.

When that happened, I ended up wanting to touch Haru again as soon as possible.

When I thought that if I turned around and went back, I could see her again immediately, my body was almost close to stopping.

In fact, I really did stop.

"....."

I shook my head.

"No, I can't."

If I went back to the apartment now, I felt that I would be hopeless. That I would melt.

It's too early for that sort of thing. Not yet. I took another step forward and saved face.

Didn't I just say I was good at holding back?

But maybe this was just part of falling in love with someone.

It made you more and more insistent on having your desires. In other words, it made you indulgent.

My answer was that greed and love were very difficult to separate from each other.

I would probably become even closer to my real self from here on out.

I only hoped that that would be connected to Haru's happiness.

...But, for three more months or so, I wanted to at least feign

being a good senpai.

It would be no joke if “Sayaka-senpai” couldn’t even last a whole year.

I was so happy right now that I could have strange internal conflicts like this.

Happy enough that no matter how much I breathed in the cold, or touched the open air, something warm continued to flow deep in my chest.

Partway through walking to the station, as I followed the many twinkles of the town with my eyes, I looked up at the sky.

In sync with my large inhale and exhale, several stars wavered.

I was sure spring was right around the corner.

Afterword

AND SO ENDS the third book about Saeki-senpai. Technically, that means the series is complete.

I had to write a little beyond the original story, so I was somewhat nervous. I felt a little bit like *Is it really okay for me to write something like that?*, but I still worked as hard as I could to try writing it. I hope you were able to enjoy it.

Nakatani-san chose the name of Edamoto Haru-san, who appears in the book. I'm terrible at choosing names... When I can't think of one, I end up writing the story without giving them a name at all...

My overall impression of participating in this project is: *wow, how strange*. Of course, since I was depicting a character that didn't appear in the manga based on very basic information, I naturally had to come up with everything myself, so...I feel like there's something about her that's a little different from the manga's atmosphere. Though I was trying my best to describe her as a regular character, somehow my own idiosyncrasies ended up sneaking in anyway. Yes, individual sensibilities really are ambiguous and strange, but they definitely exist. That's what I learned from working on this project.

Also, I started naming the chapter titles based on the original work starting from volume two. What did you think? Did they seem to resemble the original? I love thinking of chapter titles. It's probably the most fun for me when it comes to writing a novel. Actually, I'd prefer to just write chapter titles and call it a day. But of course I can't do that.

At any rate...

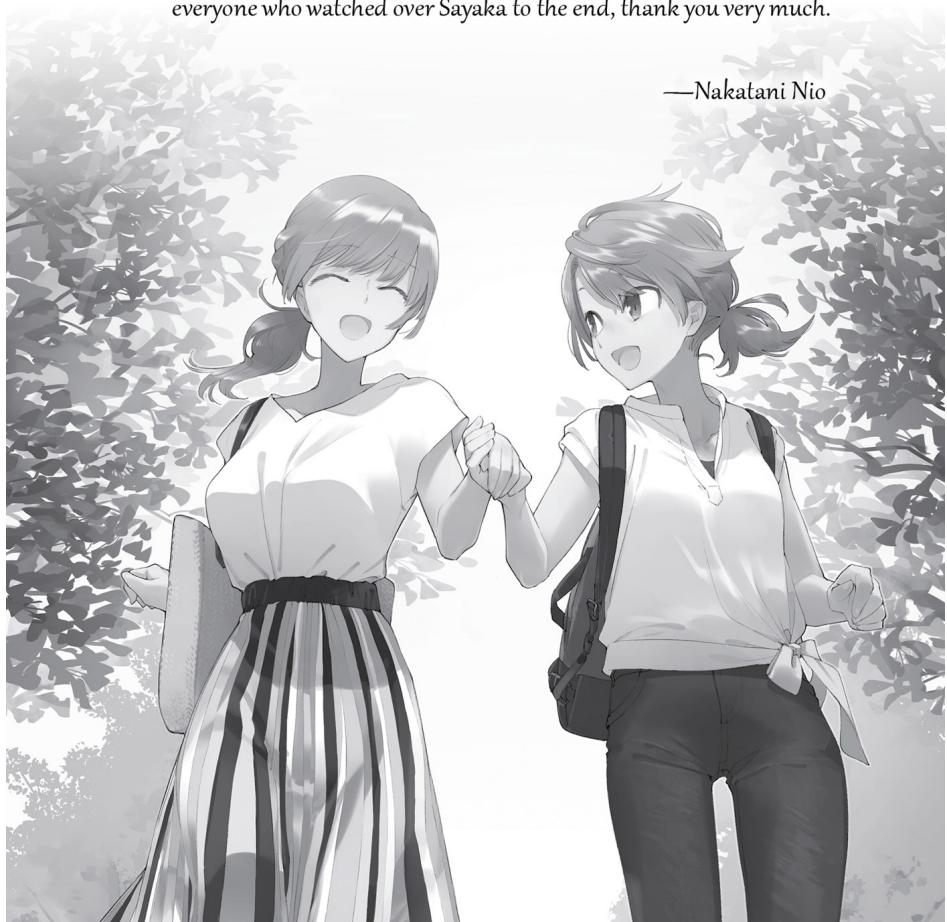
We were only able to release the novelizations to their conclusion because of everyone who bought them.

Thank you very much.

—Hitoma Iruma

Hello. I'm Nakatani Nio. With this book, the *Regarding Saeki Sayaka* series, which continued the original story, is now complete as well. Even now, the honor of Iruma-san writing a three-volume spin-off focusing on one of my characters is so great that I feel like there must have been some mistake. Since this was the last volume, I asked Iruma-san to please make Sayaka very happy. To Iruma-san and everyone who watched over Sayaka to the end, thank you very much.

—Nakatani Nio





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